NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

FIELD GUIDE SIX

CALLING NEW LEADERSHIP

Practicing Mutual Discernment



A FIELD GUIDE FOR CONGREGATIONS
PREPARING FOR THEIR NEXT CHAPTER TOGETHER

About This Field Guide

Pastoral transitions are not simply organizational events.

They are seasons of spiritual discernment.

Congregations remember their past, attend to the present, and prepare for the future God is already creating. They ask new questions, discover new possibilities, and learn again to trust the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This Field Guide is designed to accompany you through one stage of that journey.

Rather than providing a detailed policy manual or a step-by-step process, it explores the spiritual practices, practical wisdom, and relational habits that help congregations navigate pastoral transitions faithfully. Its purpose is not simply to help a church complete a search, but to help a congregation become the kind of community that is ready to welcome new leadership with wisdom, hope, and grace.

The book is organized in two parts.

Part One — The Field Guide invites you to reflect on the principles of faithful discernment. Each chapter explores a different stage of the journey, offering biblical reflection, practical wisdom, stories from congregational life, questions for conversation, and prayers to guide your work. Some committees will choose to read the guide from beginning to end before beginning their search. Others may return to individual chapters as they reach each stage of the process.

Part Two — The Field Manual provides practical resources that support the work described in the Field Guide. There you will find planning guides, worksheets, interview resources, sample communications, checklists, discernment exercises, timelines, and other tools designed to help your committee put these ideas into practice.

Throughout the Field Guide you will occasionally see references to the Field Manual, such as:

> **Field Manual**
> FM 4.2 — Interview Planning Worksheet

These references point you to practical resources that expand upon the ideas being discussed. The Field Guide explores the *why* of faithful discernment. The Field Manual focuses on the *how*.

The two parts are intended to be used together.

Every congregation, every denomination, and every search process is different. Some traditions require greater confidentiality than others. Some involve regional governing bodies at different stages of the search. Others follow different patterns of discernment and approval. Adapt these resources thoughtfully to the practices and polity of your own church, always remembering that no guide can replace prayerful listening, honest conversation, and careful discernment within your own community of faith.

Above all, remember that this is not simply a book about finding a pastor.

It is a book about recognizing a partnership.

Long before a search committee begins its work, God is already at work preparing both congregation and pastor for the ministry they will one day share.

My hope is that these pages will help you recognize that work more clearly, participate in it more faithfully, and begin your next chapter together with confidence, humility, and hope.

Contents

Introduction — Recognizing the Partnership 5
Chapter One — Preparing the Search Team 9
Chapter Two — Reading with the Eyes of Discernment 16
Chapter Three — The First Conversation 24
Chapter Four — Asking Better Questions 32
Chapter Five — When the Candidate Interviews You 42
Chapter Six — Talking Honestly About Your Theology 50
Chapter Seven — When the Journey Takes an Unexpected Turn 59
Chapter Eight — The Interview Weekend 67
Chapter Nine — Recognizing the Partnership 78
Chapter Ten — Extending the Call 87
Epilogue — The Journey Continues 95
About the Series 100
About the Author 103

Introduction

Recognizing the Partnership

Every pastoral search begins with a question.

Who will become our next pastor?

It is an understandable question.

Congregations have experienced a season of change. They long for stability, hope, and new leadership. Search committees devote countless hours to reviewing profiles, conducting interviews, checking references, and praying for wisdom. Everything seems to point toward finding the right person.

Faith gradually teaches the Church to ask a different question.

Whom is God preparing us to serve beside?

Those two questions sound similar.

They are profoundly different.

The first assumes the committee's task is to identify the best candidate.

The second assumes that long before the search committee ever gathered, God was already at work preparing both congregation and pastor for a shared ministry.

That conviction lies at the heart of Christian discernment.

We believe God is active.

The Holy Spirit has not been waiting for a committee to begin meeting before imagining the future of a congregation. Christ has already been present in the life of the church, shaping its experiences, refining its hopes, revealing its gifts, and preparing it for what comes next. At the same time, God has been shaping pastors through congregations served, successes celebrated, disappointments endured, relationships formed, and lessons learned.

The work of a search committee is not to manufacture God's future.

It is to recognize it.

That is why this guide speaks often about **partnership**.

Pastors are not hired to rescue congregations.

Congregations are not searching for religious employees.

Together they become partners in the ministry Christ is already carrying out in a particular place.

The search process, then, is not simply about evaluating qualifications.

It is about discovering whether two stories are beginning to converge into one shared vocation.

This understanding changes the way we approach every stage of the journey.

Profiles become more than résumés.

Interviews become more than evaluations.

Questions become opportunities for curiosity rather than tests with correct answers.

Reference conversations become opportunities to understand a person's ministry more fully.

Even the interview weekend becomes something more than an extended candidating event.

It becomes a shared experience in which congregation and candidate begin imagining what ministry together might look like.

Throughout these pages you will notice another conviction.

Discernment grows through relationships.

The most important discoveries rarely come from a single answer or one impressive sermon. They emerge gradually through conversation, shared meals, attentive listening, honest reflection, and prayer.

Discernment is seldom hurried.

It matures as trust grows.

This guide will not tell you how to identify the perfect pastor.

Such a person does not exist.

Nor will it offer formulas that guarantee a successful search.

Every congregation is unique.

Every pastor is unique.

Every call unfolds within its own community, culture, and history.

Instead, these pages invite you to cultivate habits that help faithful discernment flourish:

Curiosity rather than assumption.

Listening rather than persuasion.

Honesty rather than performance.

Patience rather than urgency.

Hope rather than anxiety.

Again and again, you will be invited to notice not only what candidates say, but how they have been formed; not only what your congregation hopes for, but who your congregation is becoming; not only where God has been faithful in the past, but where Christ may already be opening the future.

By the time a call is extended, the deepest question will no longer be,

'Is this the right candidate?'

Instead, it will have become,

'Can we recognize the partnership God has been preparing?'

That is the journey this Field Guide explores.

May it help you listen more deeply, ask better questions, speak more honestly, and trust more fully that the God who has guided the Church through every generation is already preparing the next chapter of your congregation's life together.

Chapter One

Preparing the Search Team

Before your committee ever reads a Ministry Discernment Profile, schedules a Zoom interview, or begins discussing candidates, another kind of work needs to begin.

The work of becoming a discerning community.

Many search committees assume their task is to evaluate pastors.

That is only partly true.

Your deeper calling is to become the kind of community that can recognize God's work when you encounter it.

That kind of discernment does not happen automatically. It grows through prayer, honest conversation, patience, trust, and learning to listen together.

The interviews you eventually conduct will reflect the community you first become.

Begin as a Community of Prayer

Prayer is more than the way meetings begin.

Prayer changes the people who pray.

A search committee that prays together over many months often finds that its conversations begin to change. Members become less interested in persuading one another and more interested in listening. Opinions soften. Curiosity grows. Confidence slowly gives way to trust.

Pray not only for your congregation.

Pray for the pastor God is preparing.

Pray for that pastor's family.

Pray for the congregation they may currently be serving.

Pray for candidates you will never meet because God is leading them somewhere else.

Pray for one another when the work becomes tiring or disappointing.

Over time, those prayers remind the committee that the search belongs to God before it belongs to them.

A Story from the Field

One committee began every meeting by asking a simple question.

"Where have you seen signs of God's presence since we last met?"

Sometimes members spoke about the search.

More often they spoke about a conversation at church, an answered prayer, a neighbor, or an unexpected act of kindness.

Before long, they discovered something important.

They were becoming better at recognizing God's activity long before they began recognizing a pastoral call.

Form a Covenant Together

Every committee benefits from agreeing on how it will work together.

A covenant is not a list of rules.

It is a shared promise about the kind of community you hope to become.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 1.1 — Search Team Covenant
> FM 1.6 — Confidentiality Agreement

It might include commitments such as:

- We will pray for one another.
- We will maintain appropriate confidentiality.
- We will speak honestly and graciously.
- We will assume good intentions.
- We will listen before responding.
- We will welcome differing perspectives.
- We will seek discernment rather than simply agreement.

Return to the covenant from time to time.

Especially when the work becomes difficult.

Recognize Your Assumptions

Every committee member carries hopes into the process.

One hopes for an inspiring preacher.

Another longs for a compassionate pastor.

Someone else values administration, while another dreams of community engagement.

These hopes are not the problem.

They need to be recognized.

Discernment becomes difficult whenever personal preferences quietly become God's requirements.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 1.5 — Recognizing Our Assumptions

A Story from the Field

A committee member once remarked,

"I've finally figured out who we're looking for."

The chair smiled and replied,

"That's wonderful. Now let's keep listening to see if God agrees."

The room laughed.

But everyone also understood the deeper truth.

Discernment remains open until it is complete.

Learn to Listen Before Deciding

Strong candidates create excitement.

That excitement is a gift.

It is not yet discernment.

Let conversations mature.

Invite follow-up questions.

Pray before reaching conclusions.

Sleep on important decisions.

The Holy Spirit rarely seems rushed.

A Story from the Field

One committee finished an exceptional Zoom interview.

Everyone left impressed.

Several members began talking about arranging a weekend visit immediately.

Before the discussion continued, the committee chair asked one question.

"What don't we know yet?"

The room became quiet.

For the next half hour the committee identified eight questions they still wanted to explore.

Those questions eventually became the most important part of the next interview.

Their excitement had not been misplaced.

It simply needed to mature into discernment.

Every Voice Matters

Some people think while they speak.

Others think before they speak.

Some contribute easily.

Others need an invitation.

Healthy discernment depends on hearing every voice around the table.

Committee chairs have an important ministry.

Create space for quieter members.

Ask what they noticed.

Invite different perspectives.

Sometimes the observation that changes everything comes from the person who has spoken least.

Practices to Consider

- Occasionally begin discussion with two minutes of silent reflection before anyone speaks.
- Invite every member to share one observation before open discussion begins.
- Ask members to write one question they still have before discussing next steps.
- End important conversations by asking, "What have we learned?" before asking, "What should we do next?"

A Coach's Observation

Search committees often believe they are narrowing a field of candidates.

I have found it more helpful to think of the process another way.

Every conversation teaches something.

Sometimes you learn about a candidate.

Sometimes you learn about your congregation.

Sometimes you discover assumptions you didn't realize you were carrying.

Faithful discernment is not simply finding the right pastor.

It is becoming the kind of congregation that recognizes the partnership God is preparing.

For Conversation

- What hopes do each of us bring into this search?
- What assumptions might influence our discernment?
- How will we encourage one another to remain curious?
- What practices will help us continue listening when we become excited—or disappointed?
- How do we hope people will experience our committee?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

You have entrusted us with a sacred responsibility.

Teach us to listen before speaking, to pray before deciding, and to trust before concluding.

Form us into a community that reflects your patience, your grace, and your wisdom.

Prepare us not only to recognize the pastor you are calling, but also to become the congregation you are calling us to be.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter Two

Reading with the Eyes of Discernment

Before you ever meet a pastoral candidate, you will meet them through words.

A **Ministry Discernment Profile** tells the story of a congregation.

A **Pastoral Discernment Profile** tells the story of a pastor.

Together they begin the first conversation in a process of mutual discernment.

Notice the language.

Throughout this guide we speak of **discernment profiles** rather than information forms. That choice is intentional. These documents are not simply collections of facts. They represent months of prayer, reflection, listening, and discernment. They are two communities attempting to describe honestly who they are, what they have learned, and where they believe God may be leading them.

Before anyone meets face-to-face, those two stories begin to speak to one another.

That first conversation deserves careful reading.

Read Beyond the Facts

Most search committees begin by looking for information.

How many years has the candidate served?

What degrees have they earned?

How many congregations have they served?

What size churches?

What specialized experience?

Those questions are appropriate.

They simply are not enough.

Facts tell you **where** someone has served.

They tell you very little about **how** they served, **what shaped them**, or **who they are becoming**.

Discernment deepens when curiosity becomes more important than evaluation.

Instead of asking,

"Do we like this profile?"

begin asking,

"What is this profile inviting us to explore?"

Listen for a Story

Every pastor has a vocational story.

The profile is not simply a chronology of appointments.

It is a testimony of how God has been shaping a life for ministry.

As you read, look for recurring themes.

- What gives this pastor joy?
- What kinds of ministries seem to bring them alive?
- What challenges have shaped them?
- What questions seem to guide their ministry?
- What do they celebrate?
- What do they keep returning to?

Those recurring themes often reveal vocation more clearly than accomplishments do.

A Story from the Field

A committee became concerned because one candidate had served four congregations in fifteen years.

One member quietly remarked,

"That seems like a lot of moving."

Another responded,

"Perhaps. Or perhaps there's a story we haven't heard."

There was.

Each congregation had invited the pastor specifically to guide them through significant transitions before intentionally calling longer-term leadership.

What first appeared to be instability turned out to be a consistent vocational pattern.

The résumé raised a question.

The interview revealed the calling.

Read for Formation, Not Achievement

Pastoral Discernment Profiles often describe successful ministries.

Buildings completed.

Attendance increased.

Programs expanded.

Financial challenges overcome.

Celebrate those accomplishments.

Then ask a different question.

How has this pastor been formed?

Look for evidence of:

- humility
- curiosity
- resilience
- collaboration
- emotional maturity
- learning
- adaptability
- developing other leaders
- community engagement

Those qualities often sustain ministry far longer than measurable accomplishments.

Notice Patterns

One experience tells very little.

Patterns tell much more.

Do stories repeatedly mention relationships?

Listening?

Community partnerships?

Developing lay leadership?

Helping congregations navigate change?

Teaching?

Mission?

Patterns often reveal a pastor's deepest instincts.

From Observation to Conversation

Observation

The candidate repeatedly describes ministry as "learning together."

Instead of Thinking

"That's interesting."

Consider Asking

"You've used the phrase *learning together* several times in your profile. Tell us what that means to you."

One observation.

One thoughtful question.

An entire conversation.

Read Together

No one reads a profile exactly the same way.

One committee member notices theology.

Another notices leadership.

Another notices writing.

Another notices community engagement.

Another notices the emotional tone.

That diversity is a gift.

Rather than immediately discussing whether you are interested in a candidate, invite every committee member simply to share observations.

Not opinions.

Observations.

Those observations become the foundation for your interviews.

A Story from the Field

One committee member circled the phrase,

"Our congregation discovered…"

It appeared repeatedly throughout a candidate's profile.

When the committee asked about it during the interview, the pastor smiled and said,

"I suppose I've learned that ministry isn't about bringing answers. It's about helping congregations discover what God is already doing."

That conversation shaped the remainder of the interview.

A repeated phrase had revealed a deeply held understanding of ministry.

Curiosity Is Better Than Certainty

One of the easiest mistakes a committee can make is believing they understand a candidate after reading a profile.

You don't.

You have simply been introduced.

Profiles should leave you with curiosity.

Not conclusions.

The purpose of reading is not yet to decide.

It is preparing for better conversations.

A Coach's Observation

Search committees sometimes ask,

"What did you think of the profile?"

I encourage a different question.

"What questions did the profile awaken?"

Good discernment begins not with certainty, but with curiosity.

Practices to Consider

As you read each Pastoral Discernment Profile together, ask:

- What themes appear repeatedly?
- What surprised us?
- What experiences seem to have shaped this pastor most deeply?
- What gifts seem most evident?
- What would we like to understand better?
- What questions naturally emerge from what we have read?

Notice the one question that is missing.

"Should we call this pastor?"

That question belongs much later.

For now, your task is simply to decide whether the conversation should continue.

For Conversation

- What did we notice?
- What made us curious?
- What assumptions might we be making?
- What questions deserve further exploration?
- What excites us—not about the candidate—but about the possibility of learning more?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

As we begin meeting pastors through the stories they tell, remind us that every profile represents a person whom you have been shaping over many years.

Keep us from judging too quickly.

Teach us to read with curiosity, humility, and grace.

Help us prepare not for interviews alone, but for conversations through which your Spirit may reveal a future none of us can yet fully imagine.

Amen.

Chapter Three

The First Conversation

Beginning Mutual Discernment

Every pastoral search reaches an important milestone.

For the first time, the congregation and a pastoral candidate move beyond written profiles into a real conversation.

Until now, you have been reading about one another.

Now you begin meeting one another.

That change matters.

A Pastoral Discernment Profile introduces a pastor's story. A Ministry Discernment Profile introduces a congregation's story. The first interview allows those stories to begin speaking to one another.

Remember what this conversation is—and what it is not.

It is not the moment to determine whether this person should become your next pastor.

It is the beginning of mutual discernment.

Its purpose is simpler:

Should we continue the conversation?

Approach the interview with curiosity rather than urgency. Your goal is not to answer every question in one meeting. Your goal is to begin building a conversation that allows both congregation and candidate to discover whether God may be preparing them for a shared ministry.

Prepare Before You Meet

Good interviews begin before anyone logs into Zoom.

Set aside time as a committee to prepare together.

Review the candidate's Pastoral Discernment Profile.

Discuss what each person noticed.

Identify areas of curiosity.

Select broad areas each committee member will help explore so that everyone participates naturally in the conversation.

This is also the time to review practical details.

Who will welcome the candidate?

Who will introduce committee members?

Who will keep an eye on the schedule?

Who will conclude the interview?

Simple preparation allows everyone to relax and attend to the conversation rather than the logistics.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 3.1 — First Interview Planning Worksheet
> FM 3.3 — Interview Responsibilities Checklist

Most importantly, pray together.

Not simply that the interview will go well.

Pray that everyone involved will become more attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A Story from the Field

One committee spent nearly two hours preparing for their first interview.

They didn't spend that time writing questions.

Instead, they talked about what they had noticed in the candidate's profile.

What surprised them?

What made them curious?

What would they like to understand better?

By the end of the evening they discovered they were no longer preparing to interview a candidate.

They were preparing to begin a conversation.

That shift changed the tone of the entire interview.

Creating a Comfortable Environment

First impressions matter, but hospitality matters more.

Candidates are often just as anxious as search committees.

A warm welcome helps everyone settle into conversation.

Begin by introducing each committee member.

Share your role in the congregation and, if appropriate, how long you have been part of the church.

Briefly explain how the interview will unfold.

Tell the candidate approximately how long you expect the conversation to last.

Explain that there will be time near the end for their questions as well.

Small gestures embody hospitality.

Smile.

Use the candidate's name.

Thank them for taking the time to meet with you.

These acts remind everyone that this is a conversation among Christians—not an examination.

Practical Considerations for Zoom Interviews

Many first interviews now take place online.

A little preparation keeps the technology from becoming the conversation.

Field Manual
FM 3.4 — Zoom Interview Checklist

Before the interview:

- Test microphones, cameras, and internet connections.
- Encourage committee members to join a few minutes early.
- Choose a quiet, well-lit location.
- Silence phones and other devices.
- Position the camera at eye level whenever possible.
- Keep backgrounds simple and free from distractions.

If technical problems arise, don't panic.

Grace and good humor usually carry the moment.

Remember, you are not evaluating someone's ability to manage technology.

You are beginning a relationship.

Share Your Timeline

One of the greatest frustrations candidates experience is uncertainty.

At the beginning of every interview, explain:

- where you are in your search process
- approximately how many candidates remain under consideration
- what the next step would be if the conversation continues
- when the candidate should expect to hear from you again

If your timeline changes, communicate promptly.

Silence is rarely experienced as discernment.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 3.5 — Candidate Communication Timeline

More often it feels discourteous.

A Coach's Observation

Search committees sometimes become so focused on their own discernment that they forget candidates may be participating in several searches at the same time.

Clear communication is more than good organization.

It is an act of Christian hospitality.

Begin with Conversation

Before moving into prepared questions, spend a few minutes helping everyone become comfortable.

Ask about the candidate's travels if they have recently returned from vacation.

Mention something you appreciated in their profile.

Invite them to tell you how they have been experiencing this season of discernment.

These opening moments help an interview become a conversation.

They also remind everyone that discernment grows through relationships, not interrogation.

Allow Every Committee Member to Participate

Candidates appreciate hearing from more than one person.

Rather than assigning long lists of questions to individual members, invite each person to participate naturally within a general area of conversation.

The interview should sound like one committee having one conversation—not eight people conducting eight separate interviews.

The chair's role is to guide the rhythm of the discussion, not dominate it.

Watch the time.

Invite quieter members into the conversation.

Help the interview move naturally from one topic to another.

Reserve Time for the Candidate's Questions

One of the easiest mistakes committees make is using the entire interview for their own questions.

Don't do that.

Reserve meaningful time near the end of the conversation for the candidate.

The questions candidates ask are themselves part of discernment.

Those questions are an important part of mutual discernment.

Resist the temptation to squeeze this portion into the last few minutes.

Instead, intentionally protect twenty minutes or more for this conversation.

The next chapter will explore how committees can prepare for those questions and why they are such an important part of discerning a partnership in ministry.

Conclude with Clarity

As the interview comes to a close:

Thank the candidate for their openness.

Express your appreciation for the conversation you have shared.

Review the next steps.

Remind them when they should expect to hear from the committee.

Then close your time together in prayer.

Whether or not the conversation continues, you have shared a moment of discernment together.

Treat it with gratitude.

Practices to Consider

- Pray together before every interview.
- Prepare practical responsibilities in advance.
- Test technology before online interviews begin.
- Explain the interview process and timeline clearly.
- Begin with conversation before moving into prepared questions.
- Leave generous time for the candidate's questions.
- End every interview by explaining the next steps and offering prayer.

For Conversation

- How can we help candidates feel welcomed rather than evaluated?
- Have we prepared the practical details well enough that we can simply enjoy the conversation?
- What kind of experience do we hope every candidate has of our committee?

- Are we communicating clearly throughout the search process?
- How will we demonstrate Christian hospitality from beginning to end?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

As we begin these conversations, remind us that every candidate we meet is a beloved servant whom you have been shaping for ministry.

Give us welcoming hearts, attentive spirits, and gracious words.

Help us prepare carefully, communicate honestly, and extend genuine hospitality.

May every conversation reflect the kindness of Christ and become another step in discerning the partnership you are preparing.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Chapter Four

Asking Better Questions

The Art of Spiritual Conversation

Good interviews are not built on impressive answers.

They are built on good questions.

That may seem obvious, but many search committees spend far more time preparing what they want to ask than thinking about *how* they want to listen.

The purpose of an interview is not merely to collect information.

It is to discover a person's story.

Facts tell you what someone has done.

Stories often reveal who they are becoming.

That is why spiritual conversations are different from interviews designed to fill a position. Your goal is not simply to determine whether a candidate possesses the necessary skills. It is to discern how Christ has been shaping this person's ministry, how they understand God's call, and whether your stories might become one shared story.

Thoughtful questions make room for those discoveries.

Ask Questions That Invite Stories

Some questions invite short answers.

Others invite people to tell the stories that shaped them.

Compare the difference.

Instead of asking:

"Have you led a stewardship campaign?"

Ask:

"Tell us about a time your congregation faced a significant financial challenge. What happened, and what did you learn through that experience?"

Instead of asking:

"How do you handle conflict?"

Try:

"Tell us about a disagreement that became an opportunity for growth. What made that possible?"

Instead of asking:

"Are you committed to mission?"

Ask:

"Describe a ministry that changed the way you understand the Church's mission."

Stories reveal far more than accomplishments.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 4.1 — Building Story Questions
> FM 4.4 — Interview Question Bank

They reveal character.

They reveal values.

They reveal how a pastor understands God, people, and ministry.

A Story from the Field

One committee asked every candidate the same question.

"Tell us about a ministry that did not go as you expected."

The answers were remarkably different.

One candidate spoke only about external circumstances.

Another described lessons learned.

A third reflected on mistakes, growth, and how the congregation had shaped them into a better pastor.

The committee discovered that they learned far more from one story than they would have from an hour of factual questions.

Learn the Art of the Follow-up Question

The first answer is rarely the deepest one.

Often it is simply the doorway.

Suppose a candidate says,

"One of the most meaningful experiences of my ministry was helping our congregation become more engaged in the community."

You might ask:

"Tell us more about that."

Or,

"How did that begin?"

Or,

"What surprised you along the way?"

Or,

"What did that experience teach you about yourself?"

Simple follow-up questions communicate curiosity.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 4.2 — Follow-up Question Guide

They invite reflection instead of performance.

Sometimes the richest part of the conversation begins only after the prepared questions have ended.

Become Comfortable with Silence

Many interviewers become nervous when a conversation grows quiet.

They rush to ask another question.

They answer their own question.

Or they move on too quickly.

Resist that temptation.

Silence is often where reflection begins.

A thoughtful pastor may simply be considering the question carefully.

Allow that space.

Moments of quiet are not awkward unless we decide they are.

In ministry, thoughtful pauses are often signs of wisdom rather than uncertainty.

A Coach's Observation

One search committee chair later confessed,

"Every time there was silence, I thought I had asked a bad question."

Eventually another committee member smiled and whispered,

"No. They're thinking."

That changed the way the committee listened for the rest of the search.

Use Scenarios to Explore Ministry

Questions about philosophy often produce polished answers.

Scenarios invite candidates to think aloud rather than recite a philosophy.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 4.3 — Ministry Scenario Builder

For example:

"Imagine you have been serving here for six months. A respected church member tells you they are upset about a recent decision and begins criticizing another member of the congregation. How might you respond?"

Or:

"Suppose attendance has been declining for several years, and the congregation is discouraged. Where would you begin?"

Or:

"A community leader approaches you about partnering in a ministry your congregation has never considered before. What questions would you begin asking?"

Notice what these questions reveal.

Not whether the candidate has the "right" answer.

But how they think.

How they approach uncertainty.

How they involve others.

How they discern.

Scenarios are invitations into conversation, not examinations with correct answers.

Listen for Formation

As the interview unfolds, ask yourself a different question.

Not,

"Do I like this answer?"

Instead ask,

"What has shaped this person?"

Listen for mentors.

Listen for experiences that changed them.

Listen for failures they have learned from.

Listen for the ways God has surprised them.

Formation is rarely visible in accomplishments alone.

It is found in the journey.

Pastors are continually being formed by the congregations they serve, the challenges they face, the people they love, and the grace they receive.

Those stories often tell you more than a résumé ever could.

Notice Patterns, Not Performances

One outstanding answer proves very little.

One awkward answer proves very little as well.

Discernment grows by noticing patterns.

Does humility appear repeatedly?

Curiosity?

Compassion?

Collaboration?

Hope?

How does the candidate speak about former congregations?

About colleagues?

About difficult people?

About disappointment?

Listen for recurring themes rather than isolated moments.

Patterns often reveal character more faithfully than polished responses.

Field Manual
FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews

Stay Curious

Curiosity is one of the greatest gifts a search committee brings to an interview.

Curiosity does not assume.

It explores.

It asks,

"Help us understand."

Rather than,

"Convince us."

Curious committees learn more because they create conversations in which candidates can speak honestly.

When curiosity replaces judgment, discernment becomes possible.

Choose Conversation Over Interrogation

Candidates should leave the interview feeling they have been known, not merely evaluated.

Imagine the difference between these two experiences.

One feels like an examination.

The other feels like a thoughtful conversation among Christians seeking to recognize God's call.

Your questions matter.

Your listening matters even more.

The best interviews rarely feel like interviews.

They feel like two communities of faith wondering together whether God might be preparing them for a shared future.

A Story from the Field

A candidate once thanked a search committee at the end of an interview.

"You asked difficult questions," they said.

"But I never felt I was defending myself.

I felt you genuinely wanted to know me."

Months later, after accepting the call, the pastor reflected that the interview itself had become one of the reasons they sensed this congregation might become home.

The committee had not impressed them with clever questions.

They had welcomed them with genuine curiosity.

Practices to Consider

- Prepare fewer questions and explore them more deeply.
- Ask questions that invite stories rather than opinions alone.
- Use follow-up questions generously.
- Become comfortable with silence.
- Include ministry scenarios that invite thoughtful reflection.
- Listen for patterns rather than isolated answers.
- Notice how the candidate has been formed through experience.
- Let curiosity guide the conversation.
- Remember that your goal is conversation, not interrogation.

For Conversation

- Which of our questions invite stories rather than short answers?
- How comfortable are we allowing silence?
- What follow-up questions help us listen more deeply?
- What patterns are we hoping to recognize throughout the interview process?
- How can our interviews reflect genuine curiosity and Christian hospitality?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

Teach us to ask questions that open hearts rather than close conversations.

Give us curiosity instead of assumptions, patience instead of haste, and listening ears that recognize the quiet work of your Spirit.

Help us hear not only what is said, but the stories of grace, growth, and calling that lie beneath the words.

May every conversation draw us closer to the partnership you are preparing for the sake of your Church and your mission.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter Five

When the Candidate Interviews You

Welcoming Mutual Discernment

There comes a moment in every interview when the roles begin to change.

The search committee has asked its questions.

The candidate has shared stories, reflected on ministry, and described experiences that have shaped their vocation.

Then someone says,

"What questions do you have for us?"

Many committees treat that moment as a formality.

It is anything but.

It may be the most revealing conversation of the entire interview.

For just as your committee is discerning whether this pastor might be called to your congregation, the candidate is discerning whether God may be calling them to join your ministry.

Discernment has always been mutual.

The candidate is not simply seeking a position.

They are seeking a congregation with whom they can faithfully share the work of Christ.

That means their questions deserve the same thoughtful attention you hoped they would give yours.

Welcome Their Questions

Resist the temptation to watch the clock.

Protect generous time for this conversation.

Candidates often reveal as much through the questions they ask as through the answers they give.

Some will ask about worship.

Others about mission.

Others about the community.

Others about relationships, leadership, or the future.

Listen carefully.

The questions themselves provide insight into what matters most to them.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 5.1 — Questions Candidates Commonly Ask

A Story from the Field

One committee left only five minutes for the candidate's questions.

The candidate smiled politely, asked one brief question, and thanked everyone for their time.

Later the committee wondered why the candidate declined further conversations.

Only afterward did they realize what had happened.

Without intending to, they had communicated that their questions mattered more than the candidate's.

The next search was different.

The committee intentionally reserved nearly thirty minutes for the candidate's questions.

The conversation became richer, more relaxed, and far more revealing than anything they had planned themselves.

Answer Honestly

Candidates are not looking for perfect congregations.

They are looking for honest ones.

If your congregation has experienced conflict, acknowledge it.

If attendance has declined, say so.

If finances have been difficult, explain what you have learned.

If there are challenges ahead, describe them truthfully.

Honesty begins building trust.

Most experienced pastors understand that every congregation has strengths and struggles.

What they hope to discover is whether a congregation is self-aware enough to talk about both.

Speak With One Voice

Search committees do not need identical opinions.

Healthy committees rarely have them.

They do, however, need shared honesty.

If members offer very different descriptions of the congregation, the candidate may leave wondering whether they have met one church or several.

That doesn't mean disagreement should be hidden.

It means differences should be expressed respectfully and thoughtfully.

The committee has spent months discerning together.

Let that shared work be reflected in your responses.

Expect Questions That Matter

Candidates often ask practical questions.

They also ask questions that reveal how they discern ministry.

You may hear questions like these:

- How would you describe the theology of the congregation?
- What are the congregation's deepest strengths?

- What challenges are you hoping your next pastor will help address?
- How would you describe the relationship between the pastor, Session, and staff?
- How is this congregation known in the community?
- What values seem to shape your life together?
- Where have you seen signs of new life during the past few years?
- What has been most difficult for your congregation?
- Are there conversations that members find especially challenging?
- What kind of leadership helps this congregation flourish?

These are not difficult questions because they expose weakness.

They are important questions because they invite honesty.

Be Ready to Tell the Truth About Yourselves

By the time candidates meet with your committee, they have usually read your Ministry Discernment Profile.

Now they want to know whether the people sitting around the table sound like the congregation described in that profile.

Can you tell your own story naturally?

Can you describe your congregation's character without relying on carefully crafted paragraphs?

Can you speak with hope without pretending everything is easy?

The strongest committees are not those with perfect answers.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 5.2 — Preparing Your Responses
> FM 5.3 — Telling Your Congregation's Story

They are those who know who they are.

Don't Be Afraid to Say, 'We Don't Know.'

Occasionally a candidate will ask something your committee has never considered.

That's perfectly acceptable.

Rather than inventing an answer, simply say,

"That's a thoughtful question. We haven't talked about it in quite that way."

Or,

"We'd like to think about that together before we respond."

Honesty creates confidence because it makes trust possible.

Pretending certainty where none exists rarely does.

Notice What the Candidate Is Listening For

As the conversation unfolds, ask yourselves another question.

What seems to matter most to this pastor?

Do they keep returning to community engagement?

Collaboration?

Formation?

Preaching?

Relationships?

The questions they ask often reveal their deepest hopes for ministry.

Those observations become another part of mutual discernment.

This Conversation Continues Throughout the Search

The candidate's discernment does not end with the first interview.

Every meeting.

Every meal.

Every community visit.

Every conversation with church leaders.

Every interaction with committee members.

All become opportunities for the candidate to ask,

"Could this become the place where God is calling me to serve?"

Mutual discernment continues throughout the search.

Welcome it.

A Coach's Observation

One search committee member said after an interview,

"I realized halfway through the conversation that we weren't trying to convince the candidate to come.

We were simply trying to help them discern God's call."

That realization changed everything.

The committee became more relaxed.

The candidate became more open.

The conversation became more honest.

And together they began discovering whether God was preparing them for a shared future.

Practices to Consider

- Reserve generous time for the candidate's questions.
- Answer honestly rather than trying to impress.
- Speak with a shared voice while respecting different perspectives.
- Prepare to describe your congregation naturally and authentically.
- Welcome difficult questions.
- Don't be afraid to acknowledge what you do not know.
- Listen for what the candidate's questions reveal about their vocation.
- Remember that discernment belongs to both congregation and candidate.

For Conversation

- What story does our congregation naturally tell about itself?
- Which questions from candidates have challenged us most?

- How comfortable are we speaking honestly about both our strengths and our struggles?
- What do the candidate's questions teach us about what they value in ministry?
- Are we helping candidates discern God's call, or trying to persuade them to accept ours?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

Thank you for reminding us that discernment belongs to every person you call into ministry.

Give us the humility to answer honestly, the courage to speak truthfully, and the wisdom to welcome the questions that help us know ourselves more deeply.

As we share our story, may we do so with gratitude, hope, and confidence that you are preparing both congregation and pastor for the partnership you desire.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Chapter Six

Talking Honestly About Your Theology

Helping Candidates Understand the Faith That Shapes Your Life Together

Sooner or later, every search committee is asked a question that makes the room noticeably quieter.

"How would you describe the theology of your congregation?"

Committee members often glance at one another, hoping someone else will answer.

Not because they lack faith.

Not because they don't know their congregation.

But because few people have ever asked them to describe the faith that shapes their life together.

This chapter prepares you for that conversation.

It is not about creating a theological statement.

It is about learning to describe your congregation honestly.

Begin with Conversation, Not Labels

Many congregations answer theological questions with labels.

"We're progressive."

"We're conservative."

"We're evangelical."

"We're traditional."

While those words may communicate something, they rarely communicate enough.

Different people define those labels differently. One person's "progressive" is another person's "centrist." One person's "traditional" may simply mean they love familiar hymns, while another may mean something quite different.

Labels can stop the conversation just when it should begin.

Instead of beginning with a label, begin with your life together.

Describe what your congregation actually experiences.

Instead of…

"We're a progressive church."

Try…

"Our congregation values thoughtful engagement with Scripture and believes faithful Christians sometimes arrive at different conclusions while remaining united in Christ. We encourage questions, conversation, and lifelong learning."

Instead of…

"We're a conservative congregation."

Try…

"Our congregation treasures Scripture and seeks to order its life around following Christ faithfully. Members may not agree about every issue, but they share a deep desire to grow in discipleship and live out their faith."

Notice the difference.

The labels recede.

The congregation becomes visible.

Field Manual
FM 6.1 — Describing Our Lived Theology

Describe Your Lived Theology

Candidates are not simply asking what your congregation believes.

They are trying to understand what it feels like to live and lead within your community of faith.

Consider questions such as:

- What biblical themes appear most often in preaching and teaching?
- What stories of Scripture have shaped your congregation?
- What words describe your understanding of God?
- What do members pray for?
- What kind of sermons seem to nourish the congregation?
- What ministries receive the greatest energy and support?

Those answers often communicate your theology more clearly than any formal statement.

A Story from the Field

A candidate once asked,

"If I attended worship here for six months, what would I discover about your understanding of God?"

The committee paused.

Finally, one elder smiled and said,

"You would probably hear about grace every Sunday."

Another added,

"And you'd discover that we believe God is always inviting people into something new."

A third said,

"We don't think anyone has to pretend to have it all together before they belong."

The candidate later remarked that those three answers told them more about the congregation than anything they had read in the Ministry Discernment Profile.

How Do You Read Scripture Together?

Most candidates will want to understand how Scripture functions in the life of the congregation.

Not simply whether the Bible is important.

Most churches would answer "yes" to that question.

More revealing questions include:

- How does Scripture shape decision making?
- How do you approach passages about which faithful Christians disagree?
- What role do Bible studies play in congregational life?
- Are questions welcomed?
- How do preaching and teaching help people grow?

Again, describe your practice rather than offering an abstract theological statement.

How Do You Live with Differences?

Few congregations believe exactly alike.

That need not be a weakness.

It is often a sign of maturity.

Candidates frequently want to know whether differences can be discussed honestly and respectfully.

They may ask questions such as:

- How does your congregation handle theological disagreement?
- Can members disagree and still serve together?
- How have difficult conversations shaped the congregation?
- What have you learned from those experiences?

The question beneath these questions is often:

Can we remain one body even when we do not all think alike?

Describe your experience honestly.

If disagreements have been painful, acknowledge that.

If the congregation has learned healthier ways of listening, celebrate that growth.

Your Relationship with the Denomination

Candidates also want to understand how the congregation relates to its denomination.

Questions may include:

- What does your denominational identity mean to the congregation?
- How involved are members in the wider church?
- How does the congregation experience its relationship with the denomination?
- What parts of that relationship bring life?
- Where have there been tensions?

Every denomination contains diversity.

Every congregation experiences that relationship differently.

Honest answers help candidates understand the larger context in which ministry will be shared.

Politics Is Not the First Question

Search committees sometimes worry that candidates are trying to determine whether the congregation is politically conservative or politically progressive.

Usually that is not the first concern.

More often, candidates are asking questions such as:

- Can people disagree respectfully?
- Are difficult conversations possible?
- Do members assume good intentions?
- Are relationships valued more than winning arguments?
- Can the congregation remain united when opinions differ?

Those questions are often less about politics than about congregational culture.

Describe how your congregation lives with differences.

That will often tell candidates far more than political labels ever could.

A Story from the Field

A candidate once asked,

"What happens here when people disagree?"

One committee member answered,

"We're still learning."

Another smiled and added,

"But we've become much better listeners during this transition."

The candidate later reflected that this answer gave them confidence.

It wasn't perfect.

It was hopeful.

And it was honest.

A Coach's Observation

One of the healthiest theological descriptions I have ever heard was remarkably simple.

A committee member said,

"We don't all think alike, but we have learned that our unity is found in Christ rather than in complete agreement."

That answer communicated confidence without rigidity.

It described a congregation that knew both who it was and how it hoped to live together.

Preparing Together

Before interviewing candidates, invite every committee member to answer this question in one minute:

'How would you describe the faith that shapes our congregation?'

Listen carefully.

Where do your answers overlap?

Where are they different?

You are not trying to eliminate every difference.

You are discovering the language that most honestly describes your congregation.

Then ask a second question:

'If a visitor worshiped with us for three months, what would they discover about what matters most to us?'

Those conversations often deepen the committee's own understanding of the congregation it represents.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 6.6 — Preparing a One-Minute Response

Practices to Consider

- Describe experiences before labels.
- Tell stories instead of reciting theological slogans.
- Speak honestly about areas of agreement and areas of diversity.
- Explain how your congregation approaches difficult conversations.
- Invite several committee members to respond to theological questions.
- Don't be afraid to say, "That's a wonderful question. Let me tell you a story."

For Conversation

- What words naturally describe our congregation's faith?
- What biblical themes have shaped us most deeply?
- How do people experience grace in this congregation?
- How have we grown through theological differences?
- What do we hope every pastor discovers about our life together?

Closing Prayer

God of truth,

You have called your Church to bear witness not only through what we believe, but through how we live together.

Give us the wisdom to speak honestly about our faith, the humility to acknowledge where we continue to grow, and the courage to trust that truthfulness serves your Church better than polished answers.

As we describe who we are, help us also become more fully the people you are calling us to be.

Through Jesus Christ, who is the Truth we seek to follow.

Amen.

Chapter Seven

When the Journey Takes an Unexpected Turn

Trusting God Through Disappointment

Every search committee begins in hope.

Hope that somewhere God is preparing the pastor who will become the congregation's next partner in ministry.

Hope that the search will unfold smoothly.

Hope that discernment will become increasingly clear.

Most committees also discover something they did not anticipate.

Disappointment.

A candidate withdraws.

Another accepts a different call.

Someone you had quietly begun imagining as your next pastor says,

"After much prayer, I don't believe God is calling me to your congregation."

That moment can hurt.

It should.

Healthy search committees become invested in people, not simply in résumés. They begin imagining relationships, shared ministry, and a future together.

When that imagined future disappears, something real has been lost.

The loss deserves to be acknowledged.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 7.1 — When a Candidate Withdraws
> FM 7.3 — Processing Disappointment Together

Discernment Includes Letting Go

One of the quiet assumptions many committees carry into a search is that faithful discernment should become increasingly certain.

Sometimes it does.

Sometimes discernment moves in another direction.

A faithful “no” is not evidence that the process has failed.

It may be one of the ways God continues guiding both congregation and pastor.

Remember:

The candidate is discerning too.

If they conclude they are not called to your congregation, they are not rejecting you.

They are responding as faithfully as they know how to God's call.

That honesty remains a gift, even when it is painful.

A Story from the Field

A committee spent months getting to know a candidate.

The interviews had gone well.

The congregation was already imagining an installation service.

When the candidate declined the call, one committee member quietly said,

"I feel like we've lost our pastor."

The chair responded,

"Perhaps we've lost the pastor we imagined. That doesn't mean we've lost the pastor God is preparing."

No one spoke for several moments.

Months later, after another candidate accepted the call, the committee often returned to that conversation.

Looking back, they couldn't imagine anyone else serving the congregation during that season of its life.

At the time, however, they simply needed permission to grieve.

Give Disappointment a Voice

Search committees sometimes move too quickly after receiving disappointing news.

The next name is discussed.

Another interview is scheduled.

The work continues.

But disappointment left unacknowledged can become discouragement.

Pause.

Allow people to say what they are feeling.

Someone may simply say,

"I really hoped this would work."

That is not a lack of faith.

It is evidence that the committee entered discernment with open hearts.

Practices to Consider

After disappointing news:

- Begin with prayer before discussing next steps.
- Invite each committee member to describe what they are feeling.
- Ask what the committee learned through the relationship.
- Give thanks for the candidate and their ministry.
- Release the future you had begun imagining before creating another one.

Sometimes the most faithful thing a committee can do is simply sit quietly together.

When the Committee Says No

Not every disappointment comes from the candidate.

Sometimes the committee reaches the difficult conclusion that a candidate they genuinely admire is not the right partner for this congregation.

That decision can also be painful.

Perhaps the pastor is gifted.

Perhaps you enjoyed every conversation.

Perhaps you would gladly worship with them every Sunday.

Discernment sometimes reveals that two faithful ministries are simply not being called together.

That is not failure.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 7.2 — When the Committee Discerns “No”

It is faithfulness.

Bless the ministry that will be theirs elsewhere.

Continue seeking the ministry that will become yours together.

When the Search Takes Longer Than Expected

Almost every search takes longer than someone hopes.

Congregations become impatient.

Committee members grow weary.

Questions begin to surface.

"Are we doing something wrong?"

"Why hasn't God brought us the right pastor?"

"Will we ever finish?"

Slow discernment is not failed discernment.

Some of the healthiest calls take time.

The waiting itself often prepares the congregation for the partnership that is still unfolding.

A Coach's Observation

One of the most experienced search committee chairs I ever worked with offered this wisdom:

"God has never seemed nearly as anxious about our timeline as we were."

That observation changed the spirit of the committee.

They continued working diligently.

But they stopped confusing urgency with faithfulness.

Returning to Hope

Every disappointment invites a choice.

Will we become discouraged?

Or will we trust that God continues to work even when the path changes unexpectedly?

Hope is not pretending disappointment doesn't hurt.

Hope is trusting that disappointment is not the final chapter.

Sometimes what feels like a closed door is simply the Spirit gently redirecting both pastor and congregation toward a partnership neither had yet imagined.

Faithful discernment requires open hands.

Open hands receive.

Open hands also release.

The hands that let go remain open to receive what God gives next.

A Prayer of Release

When a candidate declines your invitation to continue the process—or when your committee concludes that another candidate is not the partner God is preparing—it may be helpful to pause before moving on.

Pray together.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 7.5 — Prayer of Release

Faithful God,

Today we release a future we had begun to imagine.

We give thanks for the gifts we discovered in this servant of Christ.

Bless their continuing ministry wherever you lead them.

Receive our disappointment with kindness.

Keep us from becoming discouraged or fearful.

Renew our hope.

Help us trust that your Spirit continues preparing both the pastor you are calling and the congregation you are shaping.

Give us courage to continue listening.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For Conversation

- What have we learned through this relationship?
- What gifts did we recognize?
- What surprised us?
- What assumptions have changed?
- How has this experience prepared us for the conversations still to come?

Looking Ahead

Every conversation has prepared you for the next stage of discernment.

Now the work becomes more personal.

Meals will be shared.

The community will be explored together.

Families may meet.

Conversations will become less formal and more relational.

The interview weekend is not simply another interview.

It is an opportunity for pastor and congregation to begin imagining what life together might actually look like.

Chapter Eight

The Interview Weekend

Sharing Life Together

Every denomination has its own process for calling pastoral leadership.

Some traditions require a high degree of confidentiality throughout the search. Others invite candidates to meet members of the congregation, staff, or community leaders before a call is extended. Some include spouses and children in the process. Others limit participation to the candidate alone. In some denominations, meetings with regional or governing body leaders are an essential part of the weekend. In others, those conversations take place later.

For that reason, the suggestions in this chapter are intended to be adapted to your own polity and search process.

The principles remain.

The way they are lived out may differ.

Whatever your denomination's practices, remember this:

The interview weekend is not simply another interview.

It is an opportunity for pastor and congregation to begin sharing life together.

For months you have exchanged stories.

You have read one another's discernment profiles.

You have asked thoughtful questions.

You have listened for God's call.

Now you have an opportunity to experience something no interview can provide.

Ordinary life together.

You will share meals.

Travel together.

Meet people.

Visit places that matter.

Laugh.

Perhaps become tired.

Perhaps become surprised.

These ordinary experiences often reveal more about the possibility of partnership than another list of interview questions.

The purpose of the weekend is not to determine whether someone passes an interview.

It is to discover whether pastor and congregation can begin imagining life and ministry together.

Experience Before Evaluation

Every shared experience naturally becomes an opportunity for observation.

That does not mean treating the weekend like an extended examination.

It means paying attention.

Notice how the candidate relates to people.

Notice how your committee relates to one another.

Notice what creates energy and what creates anxiety.

Notice what sparks curiosity.

Notice where conversations become effortless.

Notice where they become difficult.

The candidate is doing exactly the same thing.

They are discovering not only your church but your culture.

How do committee members treat one another?

How do staff members speak about the congregation?

How do members welcome newcomers?

How do people speak about the previous pastor?

What stories are told over and over again?

Neither pastor nor congregation should spend the weekend trying to impress the other.

Simply be yourselves.

Authenticity matters far more than perfection.

A Story from the Field

One committee member confessed after an interview weekend,

"I kept wondering if I was supposed to be evaluating the candidate every minute."

Another member smiled and replied,

"I wasn't evaluating. I was getting to know someone."

That simple observation changed the conversation.

Instead of discussing isolated moments, the committee began asking,

"What was it like to spend time together?"

The discussion became richer, more honest, and much more helpful.

Prepare the Weekend Thoughtfully

A well-planned weekend allows everyone to relax.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner
> FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules

Provide the candidate with a written schedule well before arrival.

Include:

- meeting times
- locations
- names of participants

- transportation arrangements
- opportunities for meals
- worship
- denominational meetings, if required
- periods of rest
- anticipated ending times

A clear schedule communicates care and respect.

It also allows the candidate and family to prepare without unnecessary anxiety.

Hospitality Reflects Your Congregation

Hospitality is not entertainment or performance.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 8.3 — Hospitality Checklist

It is welcome.

Don't try to create an extraordinary weekend.

Create an authentic one.

If your congregation enjoys gathering in homes, invite the candidate into homes.

If people regularly meet at the local diner after worship, include that experience.

If community festivals, neighborhood parks, or local coffee shops are places where relationships naturally develop, visit them together.

The goal is not to showcase the congregation.

The goal is to let someone experience it.

Practical Ideas

Consider welcoming the candidate with:

- a handwritten note from the committee
- locally made gifts
- information about the community
- favorite local foods
- books about local history
- small gifts for children if they accompany the family

Thoughtfulness is remembered long after expense is forgotten.

Meals Build Relationships

Few settings reveal as much about people as a shared meal.

Meals slow conversations.

They allow stories to emerge naturally.

They give people permission to laugh, ask questions, and simply enjoy one another's company.

No formal agenda is needed.

Allow conversation to unfold.

You may discover shared interests.

You may hear stories that never would have surfaced during a structured interview.

You may notice kindness, curiosity, generosity, and humor.

The candidate is noticing those same things about you.

A Story from the Field

During one interview weekend, the most memorable conversation happened over breakfast.

The discussion wandered from local fishing spots to favorite books, grandchildren, and community traditions.

No one talked about theology or strategic planning.

Later the candidate remarked,

"That breakfast helped me imagine living here."

The committee felt exactly the same.

Introduce the Community Through Relationships

Every community has a story.

Tell it.

Rather than simply pointing out schools, neighborhoods, and businesses, explain why they matter.

Introduce people whenever possible.

Help the candidate understand:

- where families gather
- what challenges the community faces
- where hope is emerging
- where the congregation has made a difference
- where God may be opening new opportunities

Candidates are discerning more than a congregation.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 8.4 — Community Tour Planner

They are discerning a place to love.

Include the Family Whenever Possible

When your process allows, invite spouses and children to participate.

They are not spectators.

They are making a transition too.

Help them experience the community.

Introduce schools.

Visit parks.

Explore neighborhoods.

Share recreational opportunities.

If appropriate, provide information about employment opportunities for spouses.

Ask what would be helpful.

Never assume.

When a family is involved, the congregation welcomes the whole family, not only the pastor.

Field Manual
FM 8.6 — Welcoming Spouses and Families

Introduce the People Who Matter

When confidentiality permits, create opportunities for the candidate to spend time with people who will become partners in ministry.

These may include:

- staff
- Session members
- ministry leaders
- volunteers
- neighboring clergy
- community partners
- denominational leaders

Keep these gatherings conversational.

The purpose is not to conduct another interview.

It is to begin building relationships.

Respect the Need for Quiet

Interview weekends are emotionally demanding.

Build periods of quiet into the schedule.

Provide private accommodations whenever possible.

Allow time for prayer.

Reflection.

Conversation with family.

Rest is not an interruption of discernment.

It is often where discernment deepens.

Pay Attention to Ordinary Moments

Some of the most meaningful observations happen when no one realizes they are happening.

A delayed meal.

A change in plans.

A child asking an unexpected question.

A conversation with a server.

A stop at a neighborhood park.

These moments must never become tests.

They simply reveal how people naturally move through life together.

The question is never,

"Did the candidate do everything right?"

The better question is,

"What did we begin discovering about one another?"

A Coach's Observation

One committee told me after an interview weekend,

"The formal interviews confirmed the candidate's gifts. The ordinary moments convinced us we wanted to share ministry together."

I've never forgotten that sentence.

Congregations rarely live in formal interviews.

They live in committee meetings, hospital rooms, fellowship halls, parking lots, classrooms, and around kitchen tables.

If pastor and congregation cannot imagine sharing those ordinary moments together, the most impressive interview in the world will not create a lasting partnership.

Preparing Together

As you plan the weekend, ask yourselves:

- Does this schedule create opportunities for genuine relationships?
- Have we balanced conversation with rest?
- Will the candidate experience our congregation as it really is?
- Are we creating space for ordinary moments as well as formal meetings?
- If we were the candidate, would this weekend help us discern God's call?

Practices to Consider

- Adapt the weekend to your denomination's confidentiality requirements.
- Share a written itinerary well in advance.
- Include a variety of settings rather than one continuous interview.
- Tell stories instead of simply showing places.
- Build in time for quiet reflection.
- Welcome spouses and children whenever appropriate.
- Focus on sharing life together rather than evaluating one another.

For Conversation

- What experiences best reflect who we are as a congregation?
- What relationships would help the candidate understand our ministry?
- Are we trying to impress, or are we simply being ourselves?
- What ordinary moments might become opportunities for discernment?
- What are we beginning to imagine about life together?

Closing Prayer

God of every journey,

Thank you for the gift of shared meals, honest conversations, unexpected laughter, and quiet moments of reflection.

As we spend time together, help us recognize your presence in the ordinary experiences that so often reveal extraordinary grace.

Teach us to welcome one another with authenticity rather than performance, curiosity rather than judgment, and hope rather than fear.

Guide both pastor and congregation toward the partnership you are preparing, that together we may serve Christ faithfully in this place.

Amen.

Chapter Nine

Recognizing the Partnership

Listening Before Deciding

The interview weekend has ended.

The candidate has returned home.

Committee members have gone back to work and family responsibilities.

The excitement has settled.

Now begins one of the most important stages of discernment.

Resist the temptation to make the decision too quickly.

Many committees begin evaluating the candidate before they have even left the church parking lot.

"I loved the sermon."

"They seemed so genuine."

"I'm not sure we're the right fit."

Those first impressions matter.

They simply should not become the final word.

Discernment needs room to breathe.

The interview weekend was not the conclusion of your work.

It was another opportunity to listen for God's call.

Begin with Prayer

Before discussing impressions or reaching conclusions, begin with prayer.

Give thanks for the time you have shared.

Sit quietly together.

Invite the Holy Spirit to guide your conversation.

Remember that your purpose is not to persuade one another.

It is to recognize together what God may be revealing.

Prayer changes the posture of discernment.

Begin with Observations

Before expressing opinions, invite each committee member to answer one simple question:

'What did you notice?'

Not,

"What did you think?"

Not,

"Should we call this pastor?"

Simply,

"What did you notice?"

Perhaps someone noticed the candidate's curiosity.

Someone else noticed how attentively they listened.

Another observed how naturally they interacted with children.

Another remembered the thoughtful questions they asked during meals.

Observations give the committee something concrete to discern together.

Interpretations come later.

A Story from the Field

One committee agreed that no opinions would be shared until everyone had offered three observations.

By the end of the conversation, they had discovered patterns that no one person had noticed alone.

Only then did they begin discussing what those patterns might mean.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions Worksheet
> FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search

Look for Patterns

Discernment rarely rests on a single conversation or one memorable moment.

Instead, look for consistency.

Ask yourselves:

- What themes appeared repeatedly?
- What qualities remained consistent throughout the process?
- What surprised us?
- What concerns remain?
- Where did our confidence grow?

Look for patterns across:

- the Pastoral Discernment Profile
- interviews
- written responses
- shared meals
- community experiences
- worship
- informal conversations

One strong interview rarely tells the whole story.

Consistent patterns often do.

Learning from Those Who Have Served Alongside the Candidate

By this point in the process, your committee has formed its own impressions of the candidate.

Reference conversations should not replace the committee's discernment.

They should deepen it.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 9.4 — Reference Conversation Guide
> FM 9.5 — Suggested Reference Questions
> FM 9.6 — Ethical Reference Practices

The purpose of a reference conversation is not to uncover hidden problems or confirm your favorite conclusions.

It is an opportunity to understand the candidate more fully through the experience of people who have served alongside them.

Always limit your reference conversations to the individuals the candidate has identified and authorized you to contact.

If your committee believes additional perspectives would be helpful—for example, someone who has served with the candidate in a particular ministry role—ask the candidate whether they would be comfortable providing another reference. Respect their answer.

Doing so demonstrates both professional integrity and Christian care.

Good reference conversations invite stories rather than simple ratings.

Questions such as:

- What gifts have you most appreciated in this pastor?
- How have you seen them grow?
- What kind of environment helps them flourish?
- How did they build relationships?
- What advice would you offer a congregation preparing to call them?

often reveal more than questions seeking numerical evaluations.

Listen for patterns rather than isolated comments.

No pastor is without weaknesses.

No ministry is without challenges.

The goal is not perfection.

It is fuller understanding.

The Field Manual provides practical tools for conducting thoughtful, ethical reference conversations.

Distinguish Excitement from Discernment

Search committees naturally become excited.

Excitement is a gift.

It simply should not be mistaken for discernment.

Ask yourselves:

Are we excited because we enjoyed the candidate?

Or because we can genuinely imagine serving Christ together?

Those are different questions.

Excitement often comes quickly.

Discernment often grows more quietly.

Give it time.

Imagine Ministry Together

Perhaps the most important question is also the simplest.

Can we imagine serving Christ together?

Notice the wording.

Not,

"Can they lead us?"

But,

"Can we become partners in ministry?"

Imagine ordinary life together.

Session meetings.

Hospital visits.

Mission projects.

Difficult conversations.

Community celebrations.

Budget discussions.

Moments of joy.

Moments of disappointment.

Can you imagine walking through those experiences together?

Partnership is built in ordinary moments.

A Story from the Field

One committee member summarized an entire weekend with a single sentence.

"I stopped asking whether this person could become our pastor.

I started imagining what it would be like to serve Christ alongside them."

That simple shift changed the entire conversation.

Listen for Consensus

Consensus is not unanimous enthusiasm.

It is a growing sense that God has been preparing pastor and congregation for one another.

Some committee members become convinced quickly.

Others need more time.

Honor both.

Invite quieter members into the conversation.

Ask what gives them hope.

Ask what concerns remain.

Healthy consensus grows through listening rather than persuasion.

It's Okay to Wait

Occasionally the wisest decision is not to decide.

Perhaps another conversation is needed.

Perhaps more prayer.

Perhaps another reference conversation.

Patience rarely weakens discernment.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 9.7 — Remaining Questions Worksheet
> FM 9.8 — Discernment Before Recommendation

Haste sometimes does.

A Coach's Observation

One experienced search committee chair once told me,

"Our decision wasn't made when everyone became enthusiastic.

It was made when everyone became peaceful."

I've never forgotten that distinction.

Excitement rises and falls.

Peace often grows quietly.

Learn to recognize the difference.

Preparing Together

Before taking formal action, ask one another:

- What have we learned about this pastor?
- What have we learned about ourselves?

- Where have we seen consistent patterns?
- What questions remain?
- Can we imagine sharing the ordinary work of ministry together?
- Do we sense peace as well as excitement?

Practices to Consider

- Wait at least one day before making a final recommendation.
- Begin with prayer and silence.
- Share observations before opinions.
- Look for recurring patterns rather than isolated moments.
- Complete reference conversations before making a recommendation.
- Allow consensus to emerge naturally.
- Trust that faithful discernment often matures quietly.

For Conversation

- What surprised us most?
- What patterns have emerged?
- What have the references helped us understand more clearly?
- Where do we sense growing confidence?
- Can we imagine becoming partners in Christ's ministry?

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit,

Thank you for every conversation, every shared experience, and every person who has helped us discern your call.

Grant us patience when we are eager, courage when we are uncertain, and wisdom when decisions must be made.

May we recognize not simply an outstanding pastor, but the partnership you have been preparing for the sake of your Church and your mission.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Chapter Ten

Extending the Call

Beginning the Partnership Well

There comes a moment in every search when discernment gives way to invitation.

After months of prayer, conversations, interviews, shared experiences, and careful listening, the committee reaches a conclusion.

It is time to ask a pastor to become your partner in ministry.

This is one of the most joyful moments in the life of a search committee.

It is also one that deserves great care.

Extending a call is more than communicating a decision.

It is the beginning of a relationship.

How you extend that invitation sets the tone for everything that follows.

Extend the Call Personally

A pastoral call should not arrive first as an email.

Whenever possible, extend the call in person.

If distance makes that impossible, arrange a phone or video conversation.

The candidate should hear your voices.

See your faces.

Experience your joy.

This conversation is not a business transaction.

It is the beginning of a shared ministry.

A Story from the Field

One committee chair later reflected,

"When I called to extend the invitation, I realized we weren't offering someone a job. We were inviting a family into our lives."

That realization changed the entire conversation.

Celebrate Before You Negotiate

Begin with gratitude.

Tell the candidate what your committee has experienced during the discernment process.

Share what gave you confidence.

Describe the gifts you believe God has prepared for this season of ministry.

Then turn to the practical details of the call.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 10.2 — Terms of Call Checklist
> FM 10.3 — Extending the Call Conversation

Pastors need to know they are being called because of who they are—not simply because agreement has been reached on compensation.

Speak Clearly About the Terms of Call

By the time a call is extended, conversations about compensation should not come as a surprise.

Most candidates will already have a general understanding of the salary range and benefits being considered.

Now is the time to speak clearly and specifically.

Depending upon your denomination and governing body, the terms of call may include:

- salary
- housing or housing allowance
- pension and medical benefits

- continuing education
- vacation and study leave
- moving expenses
- professional expenses
- sabbath or sabbatical provisions
- other negotiated benefits

Be certain that the terms you offer are consistent with your congregation's approved budget and with any denominational requirements governing compensation.

If your denomination establishes minimum terms of call or requires approval from a governing body, seek that guidance early in the process rather than waiting until an offer is made.

Clear expectations help both congregation and pastor begin the relationship with confidence.

Allow Time for Discernment

A call is an invitation.

Not a demand for an immediate answer.

Candidates may wish to pray.

Speak with family.

Consult trusted friends or mentors.

Review practical considerations.

Respect that process.

The candidate deserves the same freedom to discern that the committee has practiced throughout the search.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 10.4 — Candidate Discernment Timeline

A Coach's Observation

Sometimes search committees become anxious after extending a call.

"Why haven't they answered yet?"

Remember what you have been asking of yourselves throughout this journey.

Listen.

Pray.

Trust God's timing.

Offer the candidate the same grace you have hoped to receive.

Inform Other Candidates Promptly

Once the candidate has accepted the call and all necessary approvals have been completed, promptly contact the other candidates who remained in the search process.

Do not leave them wondering.

Many have invested significant prayer, time, and hope in your congregation.

Treat them with the same respect and gratitude you would hope to receive.

Whenever possible, communicate personally before sending written confirmation.

A Sample Conversation

"Thank you for allowing us to get to know you and your ministry. We are deeply grateful for the time, prayer, and openness you shared with us throughout this process.

After much prayer and discernment, our committee has recommended another candidate whose gifts and sense of call seem especially aligned with our congregation's present season of ministry.

We continue to give thanks for your ministry and pray that God will guide you to the congregation where your gifts will flourish.

May God's peace accompany you as you continue your own journey of discernment."

There is no need to compare candidates or explain your decision in detail.

Gratitude, honesty, and blessing are enough.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 10.5 — Communicating with Other Candidates

Prepare the Congregation

Once the candidate has accepted the call and any required approvals have been completed, begin preparing the congregation for this new season.

Share the story of the search process.

Express gratitude for the committee's work.

Invite the congregation to pray for their new pastor and family.

Help members understand that calling a pastor is not the end of transition.

> **Field Manual**
> FM 10.6 — Preparing the Congregation

It is the beginning of a new relationship.

The Search Committee's Ministry Is Not Yet Finished

Many committees assume their work is complete once the call has been accepted.

In reality, one final ministry remains.

The committee has become the bridge between the congregation and its new pastor.

In the weeks ahead, committee members can continue serving by helping the pastor and family become at home.

Introducing neighbors.

Answering questions.

Helping relationships develop.

Praying together.

Creating opportunities for connection.

That important work belongs to the next Field Guide:

Field Manual
FM 10.7 — Search Committee Transition Checklist
FM 10.8 — Handoff to Beginning Ministry Together

Beginning Ministry Together.

A Coach's Observation

The healthiest search committees I've known have understood that their final act was not making a recommendation.

Their final act was helping a new pastor become part of the congregation's life.

They knew that a successful search is measured not only by extending a call, but by nurturing a partnership.

Practices to Consider

- Extend the call personally by phone or video whenever possible.
- Speak clearly about the terms of call.
- Respect the candidate's need for continued discernment.
- Notify other candidates promptly and graciously.
- Prepare the congregation for the arrival of its new pastor.
- View the committee's work as continuing until the new pastor is well welcomed.

For Conversation

- How can we extend this invitation in a way that reflects Christian hospitality?
- Have we communicated the terms of call clearly?
- How will we bless those who were not called?
- What can we do to prepare the congregation for this new partnership?
- How will our committee continue supporting the pastor during the first months of ministry?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

Thank you for leading us through this season of discernment.

As we extend this invitation, may it be received with joy, wisdom, and peace.

Bless the pastor and family who now consider this call.

Bless those whose journeys are leading elsewhere.

And prepare this congregation for the new relationships, new ministries, and new discoveries that lie ahead.

May the partnership now beginning bear witness to your love for many years to come.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Looking Ahead

Calling a pastor is not the end of the journey.

It is the beginning.

The next Field Guide, **Beginning Ministry Together**, explores how a search committee can become a bridge between pastor and congregation, helping new relationships take root, introducing the pastor to the wider community, supporting the pastor's family, and nurturing the partnership that has only just begun.

Healthy transitions are not measured by the day a call is accepted.

They are measured by the relationships that flourish in the months and years that follow.

Epilogue

The Journey Continues

Every pastoral search eventually reaches a moment that feels like the finish line.

The call has been extended.

The pastor has said "yes."

The congregation celebrates.

The search committee breathes a long-awaited sigh of relief.

After months of meetings, prayers, interviews, discernment, and waiting, it is tempting to believe the work is complete.

In one sense, it is.

The ministry of discerning new pastoral leadership has reached its conclusion.

But in another—and perhaps more important—sense, a new journey has just begun.

The acceptance of a call is not the destination.

It is the trailhead.

Everything you have done throughout this process has been preparing for something much larger than selecting a pastor.

You have been preparing for a partnership.

The New Testament describes the Church as the Body of Christ, where every member brings unique gifts for the sake of the whole. A pastoral call is one expression of that larger truth. Congregation and pastor do not complete one another. Together they become partners in the work Christ is already doing in their community.

That partnership will not be built during an interview.

It will not be established at the installation service.

It will grow through ordinary days.

Through worship and committee meetings.

Hospital visits and difficult conversations.

Shared laughter and shared disappointment.

Celebrations and grief.

Mission projects and neighborhood relationships.

Little by little, trust takes root.

The search committee has played a sacred role in bringing pastor and congregation to this threshold.

Along the way, you have learned to pray together.

To listen.

To ask better questions.

To speak honestly.

To welcome with generosity.

To recognize that discernment is not about finding perfect people but discovering faithful partners.

Those lessons can continue blessing the congregation long after the committee's work has ended.

Perhaps the greatest gift you can offer your new pastor is not a flawless search process.

It is a congregation that has learned how to listen.

A congregation that has become more self-aware.

More honest.

More hopeful.

More trusting of the Holy Spirit.

Those qualities will nurture ministry for years to come.

Remember, too, that every pastor arrives as a learner.

No one understands a congregation on the first day.

No congregation fully understands a new pastor on the first day.

The months ahead will be a season of discovery.

Extend the same grace you extended throughout the search.

Be patient.

Be curious.

Keep asking good questions.

Keep listening deeply.

Keep trusting that Christ is still leading you.

The search committee's formal responsibilities may soon conclude, but your ministry of welcome continues.

Some of the most meaningful work now begins.

Introducing the pastor to neighbors.

Helping new friendships develop.

Creating opportunities for shared ministry.

Praying together.

Encouraging one another.

Making room for trust to take root.

Healthy transitions are rarely remembered because everything happened perfectly.

They are remembered because people chose to walk together with kindness, patience, and hope.

Thank you for accepting this ministry.

Serving on a search committee is seldom easy.

It requires time, emotional energy, difficult conversations, and countless prayers.

Often it is unseen work.

Yet through that quiet faithfulness, congregations discover new beginnings.

May God bless the congregation you have served.

May God bless the pastor who now joins your community.

And may God bless the partnership that is just beginning.

The journey of calling new leadership has come to its conclusion.

The journey of becoming partners in Christ's ministry now begins.

That is the story of the next Field Guide:

Beginning Ministry Together

Because calling a pastor is not the end of the journey.

It is the beginning of a shared life in Christ.

"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."
— Romans 15:7

About the Series

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

Pastoral transitions are among the most significant seasons in the life of a congregation.

They bring endings and beginnings, grief and hope, uncertainty and possibility. They invite congregations to remember who they have been, discern who God is calling them to become, and prepare to welcome new partners in ministry.

Too often, churches experience these seasons as a series of administrative tasks—forming committees, completing paperwork, conducting interviews, and extending a call. Those responsibilities are important, but they are not the heart of the journey.

Pastoral transitions are, first and foremost, spiritual journeys.

They invite congregations to listen more deeply, pray more intentionally, tell their stories more honestly, and trust that Christ is already at work preparing both congregation and pastor for the future they will share.

The **Navigating Pastoral Transitions** series was written to accompany congregations through each stage of that journey.

Rather than offering a single comprehensive manual, each Field Guide focuses on one movement of the transition process, allowing leaders to give thoughtful attention to the particular opportunities, challenges, and practices that belong to that season.

The series includes:

- **Navigating Pastoral Transitions** — An overview of the entire journey from preparing for transition through beginning ministry together.
- **Preparing** — Cultivating hope, remembering God's faithfulness, and preparing spiritually for the journey ahead.
- **Ending Well** — Honoring ministry that has been shared, expressing gratitude, grieving healthy endings, and blessing one another for the future.
- **Listening** — Learning to hear the congregation, the community, and the movement of the Holy Spirit with fresh attentiveness.
- **Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile** — Telling the congregation's story with clarity, honesty, and hope while discerning the gifts needed for the next season of ministry.
- **Calling New Leadership** — Practicing mutual discernment through conversations, interviews, shared experiences, and the extension of a pastoral call.

- **Beginning Ministry Together** — Helping pastor and congregation build trust, establish healthy relationships, and begin a shared ministry with intention and grace.

Each Field Guide is followed by a **Field Manual** containing practical resources that support the work described in the guide itself. These manuals include planning tools, worksheets, sample communications, discussion guides, checklists, timelines, and other resources designed for use by pastors, sessions, search committees, and congregational leaders.

The guides explore *why* these practices matter.

The Field Manuals help you put them into practice.

Although the series reflects many years of experience within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), its principles are intentionally ecumenical. Congregations in many Christian traditions will recognize their own experiences within these pages. Because every denomination has its own polity and call process, readers are encouraged to adapt the practical suggestions to the requirements and traditions of their own church.

Throughout the series, one conviction remains constant:

God is already at work.

Pastoral transitions are not simply seasons to be managed. They are opportunities to recognize where Christ is leading and to join the work the Holy Spirit has already begun.

May these Field Guides encourage your congregation to move through every transition with wisdom, courage, hope, and grace, trusting that every faithful ending can become the beginning of something new.

About the Author

Lorne Bostwick is a pastor, coach, counselor, and consultant who has spent more than four decades helping congregations navigate seasons of change. His ministry has included serving churches as an associate pastor, solo pastor, head of staff, and interim pastor, as well as accompanying congregations through pastoral transitions, conflict, visioning, and renewal.

Throughout his ministry, Lorne has been convinced that healthy transitions are about far more than finding the next pastor. They are opportunities for congregations to rediscover who they are, recognize where God is already at work, and prepare for faithful partnerships in ministry. That conviction lies at the heart of the **Navigating Pastoral Transitions** series.

In addition to parish ministry, Lorne has served as a pastoral counselor, coach, and consultant to pastors, church leaders, sessions, and search committees. His work has included leadership development, congregational assessment, pastoral transition, and conflict transformation. Drawing from years of experience in pastoral ministry, family systems, narrative approaches, and organizational leadership, he seeks to help congregations become healthier, more hopeful, and more attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Lorne is also the author of **Reimagining the Church**, a companion series of reflections and stories encouraging congregations to recover their missionary imagination by learning to see their communities with fresh eyes and joining the work Christ is already doing in their place.

His writing is shaped by a simple conviction:

Healthy churches are not built by better techniques alone.

They grow as people learn to listen more deeply, love more generously, and trust more fully that God is always creating new possibilities for faithful ministry.

Lorne and his wife, Debi, make their home in Milton, Florida, where they continue to encourage congregations, mentor church leaders, and enjoy the beauty of the Gulf Coast.

To learn more about Lorne's writing, coaching, consulting, and additional resources for congregations in transition, visit **www.churchandclergycoaching**.org

CALLING NEW LEADERSHIP

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DISCERNING, DEVELOPING, AND DEPLOYING LEADERS



FIELD MANUAL

THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE FOR EVERY STEP OF THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

CLARIFY THE CALL
Identify God's calling and leadership purpose.

DEVELOP THE LEADER
Equip leaders with the character and skills to serve.

DEPLOY WITH WISDOM
Build healthy teams and strengthen the mission.

A RESOURCE OF THE NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS SERIES

About This Field Manual

Calling New Leadership: Field Manual is the working-resource companion to *Calling New Leadership: Practicing Mutual Discernment* in the *Navigating Pastoral Transitions* series.

The Field Guide provides the pastoral, theological, and practical guidance for the search process. This Field Manual provides the worksheets, planning tools, checklists, reflection guides, conversation resources, and sample materials that support that work.

The resources are organized to correspond with the chapters of the Field Guide. Each is identified by an FM number. For example, FM 4.2 is a resource associated with Chapter Four. The Table of Contents provides direct electronic navigation to individual resources.

These resources are tools, not prescriptions. Search teams should use what serves their particular congregation, adapt the materials to their context, and leave aside what they do not need. Their purpose is not to make every pastoral search look alike, but to help committees practice the attentive, prayerful work of mutual discernment.

Throughout the process, the central conviction remains the same: calling new leadership is not simply the work of finding the right pastor. It is the work of pastor and congregation listening carefully enough to recognize whether God may be calling them into ministry together.

Table of Contents

Chapter One — Preparing the Search Team....6
FM 1.1....7
Search Team Covenant....7
FM 1.2....9
Committee Roles and Responsibilities....9
FM 1.3....14
Meeting Rhythm Planner....14
FM 1.4....19
Prayer Practices for Discernment....19
FM 1.5....27
Recognizing Our Assumptions....27
FM 1.6....36
Confidentiality Agreement....36
FM 1.7....41
Search Timeline Planner....41
Chapter Two — Reading with the Eyes of Discernment....49
FM 2.1....50
First Reading Worksheet....50
FM 2.2....58
Reading for Patterns....58
FM 2.3....69
From Observation to Conversation....69
FM 2.4....81
Candidate Conversation Notes....81
FM 2.5....93
Discernment Before the Interview....93
Chapter Three — The First Conversation....103
FM 3.1....104
First Interview Planning Worksheet....104
FM 3.2....116
Suggested Interview Flow....116

FM 3.3 125

Interview Responsibilities Checklist 125

FM 3.4 133

Zoom Interview Checklist 133

FM 3.5 143

Candidate Communication Timeline 143

FM 3.6 154

First Interview Reflection Worksheet 154

Chapter Four — Asking Better Questions 168

FM 4.1 168

Building Story Questions 168

FM 4.2 182

Follow-Up Question Guide 182

FM 4.3 198

Ministry Scenario Builder 198

FM 4.4 214

Interview Question Bank 214

FM 4.5 234

Questions to Avoid 234

FM 4.6 252

Listening for Patterns During Interviews 252

FM 4.7 273

Second Interview Planning Worksheet 273

Chapter Five — When the Candidate Interviews You 292

FM 5.1 293

Questions Candidates Commonly Ask 293

FM 5.2 316

Preparing Your Responses 316

FM 5.3 346

Telling Your Congregation's Story 346

FM 5.4 366

Speaking Honestly About Strengths and Challenges 366

FM 5.5 387

Questions to Continue Exploring 387

Chapter Six — Talking Honestly About Your Theology 408

FM 6.1....409

Describing Our Lived Theology....409

FM 6.2....429

If Someone Worshiped Here....429

FM 6.3....445

Scripture and Spiritual Formation....445

FM 6.4....463

Living Faithfully with Differences....463

FM 6.5....480

Our Relationship with the Wider Church....480

FM 6.6....498

Preparing a One-Minute Response....498

Chapter Seven — When the Journey Takes an Unexpected Turn....515

FM 7.1....516

When a Candidate Withdraws....516

FM 7.2....532

When the Committee Discerns “No”....532

FM 7.3....552

Processing Disappointment Together....552

FM 7.4....569

Sample Candidate Communications....569

FM 7.5....587

Prayer of Release....587

Chapter Eight — The Interview Weekend....594

FM 8.1....595

Interview Weekend Planner....595

FM 8.2....620

Sample Weekend Schedules....620

FM 8.3....642

Hospitality Checklist....642

FM 8.4....671

Community Tour Planner....671

FM 8.1....696

Interview Weekend Planner....696

FM 8.2....721

Sample Weekend Schedules....721
FM 8.4....743
Community Tour Planner....743
FM 8.5....768
People the Candidate Should Meet....768
FM 8.6....792
Welcoming Spouses and Families....792
FM 8.7....810
Candidate Information Packet Checklist....810
FM 8.8....832
Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheet....832
Chapter Nine — Recognizing the Partnership....866
FM 9.1....867
Twenty-Four Hour Discernment Guide....867
FM 9.2....901
Observation Before Opinions....901
FM 9.3....936
Looking for Patterns Across the Search....936
FM 9.4....983
Reference Conversation Guide....983
FM 9.5....1024
Suggested Reference Questions....1024
FM 9.6....1048
Ethical Reference Practices....1048
FM 9.7....1084
Remaining Questions Worksheet....1084
FM 9.8....1126
Discernment Before Recommendation....1126
Chapter Ten — Extending the Call....1172
FM 10.1....1173
Preparing to Recommend a Candidate....1173
FM 10.2....1206
Terms of Call Checklist....1206
FM 10.3....1246
Extending the Call Conversation....1246

FM 10.4 1283

Candidate Discernment Timeline 1283

FM 10.5 1320

Communicating with Other Candidates 1320

FM 10.6 1342

Preparing the Congregation 1342

FM 10.7 1366

Search Committee Transition Checklist 1366

FM 10.8 1391

Handoff to Beginning Ministry Together 1391

Chapter One — Preparing the Search Team

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 1.1

Search Team Covenant

Purpose

This covenant helps the Search Team establish a shared understanding of how it will work together throughout the pastoral search. Rather than a list of rules, it expresses the commitments the committee makes to one another, the congregation, pastoral candidates, and God.

Review the covenant together during one of your first meetings. Discuss each commitment, adapt it to your congregation's needs if necessary, and invite every member to sign it as an expression of shared ministry.

Search Team Covenant

Recognizing that we have been entrusted with the sacred responsibility of helping our congregation discern God's call to new pastoral leadership, we enter this ministry prayerfully and willingly.

Trusting that Christ is already preparing both congregation and pastor for a shared ministry, we commit ourselves to the following covenant:

We will seek God's guidance.

We will pray regularly for one another, our congregation, every pastoral candidate, and the work of discernment entrusted to us. We will remember that this search belongs first to God.

We will listen before we decide.

We will approach every conversation with curiosity rather than certainty. We will listen carefully to one another and remain open to perspectives different from our own.

We will speak honestly and graciously.

We will express our thoughts respectfully, ask difficult questions with kindness, and address disagreements directly rather than allowing frustration or misunderstanding to grow.

We will honor confidentiality.

We will protect confidential information entrusted to this committee, recognizing that faithful discernment depends upon trust. We will not discuss candidates, committee conversations, or confidential decisions outside the committee except as authorized by our process.

We will assume good intentions.

We recognize that committee members may see different things and reach different conclusions. Even when we disagree, we will assume that each person is seeking God's will faithfully.

We will remain open to God's leading.

We acknowledge that our personal preferences are not always God's direction. We will hold our expectations with humility and remain willing to be surprised by the work of the Holy Spirit.

We will encourage one another.

This work requires time, patience, emotional energy, and prayer. We will support one another, celebrate progress, extend grace in difficult moments, and remember that we serve together.

We will represent the congregation faithfully.

Our responsibility is not to find a pastor who best reflects our personal preferences, but to discern the pastor with whom God is calling this congregation to share ministry.

We will trust the process of discernment.

We will resist unnecessary haste, allow time for prayer and reflection, and seek peace rather than pressure as we move toward important decisions.

Our Commitment

As members of the Search Team, we enter this covenant freely and prayerfully, asking God to form us into a community marked by humility, wisdom, patience, honesty, and hope.

We commit ourselves to this shared ministry of discernment for the glory of God and the good of Christ's Church.

Congregation: _____

Committee Member	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Committee Member	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Leader's Note

Consider reading the covenant together at each meeting for the first month, then revisiting it periodically—particularly after difficult conversations, before interviewing candidates, or whenever the committee needs to renew its shared commitment. A covenant is not merely signed once; it is practiced throughout the journey.

FM 1.2

Committee Roles and Responsibilities

Purpose

Healthy search committees do not require everyone to do the same work. They require the essential responsibilities to be shared clearly and faithfully.

In smaller congregations, one person may carry several of these responsibilities. In larger congregations, they may be shared among several committee members.

The important question is not, Who has what title? but, Have all of these responsibilities been covered?

Use this worksheet during one of your first meetings to decide how your committee will organize its work.

Committee Responsibilities

Committee Chair

Provides overall leadership for the committee.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Prepare meeting agendas.

☐ Facilitate committee meetings.

☐ Encourage full participation.

☐ Help maintain a spirit of discernment.

☐ Coordinate the overall search process.

☐ Serve as the primary contact person when appropriate.

Assigned to:

Vice Chair (Optional)

Provides support for the Chair and assumes leadership when necessary.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Assist with meeting leadership.

☐ Coordinate special assignments.

☐ Help maintain continuity if leadership changes.

Assigned to:

Recording Secretary

Keeps an accurate record of the committee's work.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Record meeting minutes.

☐ Maintain committee records.

☐ Track assignments and decisions.

☐ Organize important documents.

Assigned to:

Candidate Communications

Coordinates communication with pastoral candidates.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Schedule interviews.

☐ Confirm meeting details.

☐ Communicate timelines.

☐ Respond promptly to candidate questions.

☐ Ensure every candidate is treated with courtesy and respect.

Assigned to:

Hospitality Coordinator

Helps candidates experience the congregation's welcome.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Coordinate interview hospitality.

☐ Plan candidate visits.

☐ Arrange meals and lodging.

☐ Welcome spouses and families when appropriate.

Assigned to:

Prayer Coordinator

Helps keep the committee centered spiritually throughout the search.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Invite members into prayer.

☐ Encourage times of silence and reflection.

☐ Prepare devotional materials if desired.

☐ Remind the committee that discernment belongs to God.

Assigned to:

Administrative Coordinator

Helps manage the practical details of the search.

Responsibilities may include:

☐ Organize schedules.

☐ Maintain calendars.

☐ Track deadlines.

☐ Coordinate documents and meeting materials.

Assigned to:

Responsibilities Shared by Every Committee Member

Every member of the committee agrees to:

☐ Prepare carefully for meetings.

☐ Read candidate materials before discussion.

☐ Participate honestly and respectfully.

☐ Listen before drawing conclusions.

☐ Maintain confidentiality.

☐ Pray regularly for the search.

☐ Complete assigned tasks promptly.

☐ Support committee decisions once they have been reached.

☐ Remember that discernment is a shared ministry.

Our Committee Organization

Responsibility	Committee Member
Chair	_____
Vice Chair (optional)	_____
Recording Secretary	_____
Candidate Communications	_____
Hospitality Coordinator	_____
Prayer Coordinator	_____
Administrative Coordinator	_____

Additional responsibilities unique to our congregation:

Leader's Note

These roles support discernment, not bureaucracy. Avoid concentrating every responsibility in one person. When practical work is shared wisely, the committee is freer to attend to prayer, listening, and recognizing the partnership God is preparing.

FM 1.3

Meeting Rhythm Planner

Purpose

Search committee meetings hold two kinds of work together: practical work—schedules, communications, assignments, interviews, and decisions—and discernment—prayer, listening, reflection, curiosity, and attention to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Healthy meetings make room for both.

This planner offers a simple rhythm your committee can adapt throughout the search. Not every meeting will require every element, and the time devoted to each will change as the search progresses.

The goal is not rigid adherence to an agenda, but enough structure to make time for listening.

A Suggested Meeting Rhythm

1. Gather

Allow a few minutes for people to arrive and reconnect.

Before beginning the agenda, ask:

How are we arriving today?

A brief check-in can help committee members become present to one another before turning to the work.

Approximate time: _____

---

2. Pray

Begin with prayer.

Prayer may include Scripture, silence, a brief devotional reflection, or simply praying for the congregation, candidates, and one another.

Occasionally ask:

Where have you noticed signs of God's presence since we last met?

Prayer is not simply the opening item on the agenda; it is part of the committee's practice of discernment.

Approximate time: _____

Person leading: _____

---

3. Review

Briefly review what has happened since the previous meeting.

☐ What assignments were completed?

☐ What communications were received?

☐ What deadlines are approaching?

☐ Has anything changed that the committee needs to know?

Keep this portion brief whenever possible. Administrative matters matter, but they should not consume the time needed for discernment.

Approximate time: _____

---

4. Listen

This is the heart of the meeting.

Depending upon where you are in the search, you may be:

☐ Discussing Pastoral Discernment Profiles.

☐ Preparing interview questions.

☐ Reflecting on an interview.

☐ Planning a candidate visit.

☐ Discussing reference conversations.

☐ Considering whether a conversation should continue.

☐ Discerning a recommendation.

Before open discussion begins, consider allowing a minute or two of silence.

Then begin with:

What did you notice?

Invite every committee member to contribute before moving toward conclusions.

Approximate time: _____

---

5. Discern

After observations have been shared, ask what they may mean.

Helpful questions include:

What are we learning?

What patterns are beginning to emerge?

What gives us hope?

What concerns or questions remain?

What might we be assuming?

What do we need to understand better?

Are we ready to take a next step, or do we need more time?

Do not assume that every meeting must end with a decision.

Sometimes the faithful next step is another question.

Approximate time: _____

---

6. Decide and Assign

When action is needed, make the next steps clear.

Next Step	Who?	By When?
_____	_____	_____

Next Step	Who?	By When?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Before moving on, make certain everyone understands what has been decided, who is responsible, and what happens next.

---

7. Look Ahead

Before ending the meeting, briefly review what comes next.

Our next meeting: _____

Our primary task will be:

What should we do before then?

What should we be praying about?

---

8. Close

End as you began—in prayer.

Give thanks for what has been learned.

Pray for candidates with whom you are in conversation.

Pray for those whose journeys may be leading elsewhere.

Pray for your congregation.

Pray for one another.

And when the way forward is not yet clear, pray for the patience to keep listening.

Planning Our Usual Meeting

Meeting day: _____

Usual beginning time: _____

Usual ending time: _____

Typical meeting length: _____

Who prepares the agenda? _____

How will prayer leadership be shared?

How will we make sure every voice is heard?

How will assignments be tracked?

How will we know when an issue needs more time rather than an immediate decision?

A Simple Agenda

For ordinary meetings, the rhythm can be as simple as:

Gather → Pray → Review → Listen → Discern → Decide → Look Ahead → Pray

Keep this pattern nearby as the search unfolds. The content of your meetings will change; the rhythm of faithful discernment need not.

Leader's Note

A productive meeting is not necessarily one in which many decisions are made. Sometimes its most important outcome is discovering the question you have not yet asked.

Leave room for silence, unexpected conversation, and changing your mind. Structure should serve discernment, not hurry it.

FM 1.4

Prayer Practices for Discernment

Purpose

Prayer is more than the way a search committee begins and ends its meetings.

Prayer is part of how a committee learns to discern.

Over the months of a pastoral search, prayer can slow us down, loosen our certainty, deepen our listening, and remind us that the congregation's future does not depend on our wisdom alone.

The practices below are intentionally simple. Choose those that fit your committee, vary them from meeting to meeting, and allow different members to lead.

You do not need to be experts at prayer.

You simply need to make room for God.

---

1. Where Have You Seen God?

Begin the meeting by asking:

Where have you noticed signs of God's presence since we last met?

Do not limit answers to the pastoral search.

Someone may speak about worship.

A conversation with a neighbor.

An unexpected kindness.

A difficult experience.

Something happening in the community.

A moment of hope.

Allow each person who wishes to speak to share briefly.

Then offer a simple prayer of gratitude for what has been noticed.

Why This Practice Helps

A committee seeking to recognize God's activity in a pastoral search benefits from practicing that attentiveness elsewhere.

Over time, this simple question can cultivate attentiveness.

---

2. Pray for the Pastor You Do Not Yet Know

Before reviewing profiles or discussing candidates, pray for the person who may someday become your pastor.

You do not know their name.

God does.

Pray for:

- their present ministry
- their congregation
- their family
- their joys and struggles
- their own discernment
- the people from whom they may eventually have to say goodbye
- the future God may be preparing for them

Do not pray that God will "send us the right person."

Simply entrust that unknown pastor to God's care.

A Prayer

Gracious God,

Somewhere your servants are listening for your call just as we are.

We do not yet know whose journey may become joined with ours.

Bless them in the ministry they are doing today.

Bless the people they serve.

Bless those they love.

Give them wisdom, courage, patience, and freedom as they discern their future.

Prepare us to meet one another honestly when the time comes.

Amen.

---

3. Two Minutes of Silence

Before an important discussion, sit together in silence for two minutes.

No one needs to fill the space.

Breathe.

Release the arguments you may already be forming.

Notice your hopes.

Notice your anxiety.

Notice what you are trying to control.

Then begin the conversation with:

What did you notice?

Why This Practice Helps

Silence creates space between reaction and response.

It is especially useful:

- before discussing a candidate
- after an interview
- when committee members disagree
- before an important decision
- whenever the committee feels rushed

---

4. Pray the Names

When you begin conversations with candidates, place their names before the committee.

Read each name slowly.

After each name, pause briefly.

No discussion.

No evaluation.

Simply pray:

God, bless _____ and guide us all in faithful discernment.

Include candidates whose conversations will not continue.

They are not unsuccessful applicants.

They are sisters and brothers in Christ continuing their own journeys of call.

---

5. Scripture and Silence

Choose a short passage of Scripture.

Read it aloud slowly.

Sit silently for a minute.

Read it again.

Then invite committee members to respond to one question:

What word or phrase stayed with you?

There is no need to interpret the passage or turn the practice into a Bible study.

Listen.

Close with prayer.

Scriptures for Discernment

Consider passages such as:

1 Samuel 3:1–10 — "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Psalm 25:4–5 — "Make me to know your ways, O Lord."

Proverbs 3:5–6 — Trusting beyond our own understanding.

Isaiah 43:18–19 — "I am about to do a new thing."

Luke 24:13–35 — Recognizing Christ along the journey.

John 15:1–11 — Abiding in Christ.

Acts 10:9–23 — Being surprised by God's direction.

Acts 16:6–10 — Discovering that some doors close while others open.

Romans 12:3–8 — Different gifts within one body.

1 Corinthians 12:12–27 — Many members, one Body of Christ.

Philippians 1:3–11 — Prayer for growing love and discernment.

James 1:5 — Asking God for wisdom.

---

6. The Prayer of Open Hands

Invite everyone to place their hands palms down.

Spend a few moments silently naming what you need to release:

Expectations.

Anxiety.

A favorite candidate.

Disappointment.

The need to be right.

The desire to finish quickly.

Then turn your hands palms upward.

Silently name what you hope to receive:

Wisdom.

Curiosity.

Patience.

Courage.

Hope.

Peace.

End together:

Holy Spirit, help us release what we need to release and receive what you are ready to give. Amen.

---

7. Prayer Before an Interview

Immediately before an interview, resist using every remaining minute to review questions.

Stop.

Pray for the candidate by name.

A Prayer

Holy Spirit,

Thank you for bringing us into conversation with _____.

Free us from the need to impress or be impressed.

Give us curiosity to ask, patience to listen, and courage to speak honestly.

Help us receive the person before us as a servant of Christ whose story deserves our attention.

May this conversation help all of us recognize more clearly where you are leading.

Amen.

---

8. Prayer After an Interview

Before anyone says what they thought, pause.

Sit quietly together.

Then pray:

Gracious God,

Thank you for the conversation we have just shared.

Quiet our eagerness to reach conclusions.

Help us remember what we heard.

Help us notice what surprised us.

Help us distinguish our preferences from your leading.

Give us patience with unanswered questions and grace toward one another as we discern.

Amen.

After the prayer, begin with:

What did you notice?

---

9. When the Committee Does Not Agree

When disagreement becomes difficult, stop before people settle into defending positions.

Pray.

Not:

God, show us who is right.

Instead:

God, help us understand what each of us is seeing.

Allow a period of silence.

Then invite each member to answer:

What do you most want the rest of us to understand?

Listen without responding until everyone has spoken.

---

10. Prayer at a Crossroads

Use this prayer whenever the committee faces an important decision.

Faithful God,

We have listened.

We have asked questions.

We have shared what we see.

Some things seem clear, and others do not.

Keep us from mistaking urgency for guidance,

enthusiasm for certainty,

or our preferences for your call.

Give us courage to move when it is time to move,

patience to wait when it is time to wait,

and freedom to release what is not ours to hold.

Lead us toward the partnership you are preparing.

Amen.

Creating Our Prayer Rhythm

Which practices would we like to use regularly?

☐ Where Have You Seen God?

☐ Pray for the Pastor You Do Not Yet Know

☐ Two Minutes of Silence

☐ Pray the Names

☐ Scripture and Silence

☐ Prayer of Open Hands

☐ Prayer Before an Interview

☐ Prayer After an Interview

☐ Prayer When We Disagree

☐ Prayer at a Crossroads

Other practices meaningful to our congregation:

How will we share leadership for prayer?

Leader's Note

Do not evaluate whether prayer is "working" by whether the committee quickly reaches agreement.

Prayer may make discernment clearer. It may also reveal differences that need more conversation.

Prayer serves something deeper than consensus.

We pray so that, as we seek to recognize God's call, we are also formed into people capable of listening for it.

FM 1.5

Recognizing Our Assumptions

Purpose

Every member of a search committee enters the process with hopes and expectations.

You may hope for an inspiring preacher, a compassionate pastor, a strong administrator, a gifted teacher, someone who loves children, someone who will engage the community, or someone who can help the congregation grow.

Those hopes are not the problem.

They become problems when they remain unspoken, when personal preferences become requirements, or when we assume everyone else means the same thing by words such as *strong leader*, *good preacher*, or *pastoral*.

This exercise helps the committee recognize what it is carrying into the search before unexamined assumptions begin shaping discernment.

Complete Part One individually before discussing your responses together.

Part One — What Am I Bringing Into the Search?

Complete these sentences before discussing them with other committee members.

When I imagine our next pastor…

The quality I most hope they will have is:

Something I especially hope will be different from our previous pastoral experience is:

Something I hope will continue is:

A ministry gift or ability I personally value highly is:

Something about a candidate that would immediately make me enthusiastic is:

Something that might immediately concern me is:

What Does a Pastor Look Like to Me?

Complete these sentences without overthinking them.

A good preacher is someone who:

A strong leader is someone who:

A caring pastor is someone who:

A pastor who works well with people:

A pastor who understands mission:

A pastor who can help a congregation navigate change:

Now look back over your answers.

How much of what you wrote describes something essential for your congregation?

How much describes the kind of pastor **you personally prefer?**

Preference is not wrong.

What matters is recognizing it.

Part Two — Where Did My Expectations Come From?

Our expectations have histories; they come from somewhere.

Think about the pastors, congregations, workplaces, families, and other leaders who have shaped your understanding of leadership.

A pastor or leader I especially admired:

What did I appreciate about them?

A pastoral or leadership experience I found difficult:

What did that experience teach me to want—or avoid—in another leader?

An experience outside the church that has shaped what I expect from leaders:

Something from my own background that may influence how I respond to candidates:

Part Three — Preference, Congregational Need, or Requirement?

As qualities emerge in conversation, consider where each belongs.

Ask which category it belongs in.

Preference

Something I or other committee members would enjoy or appreciate.

Congregational Need

A gift or capacity that seems particularly important for the ministry God is calling this congregation to undertake now.

Requirement

Something genuinely necessary because of theology, polity, position responsibilities, professional qualifications, or another legitimate requirement of the call.

Use this table as expectations emerge.

Quality or Expectation	Preference	Congregational Need	Requirement	We Need to Discuss
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐
_____	☐	☐	☐	☐

Do not be surprised when committee members place the same quality in different columns.

That is the conversation this exercise is intended to uncover.

Part Four — Listen for the Words Beneath the Words

Search committees often use words that sound clear until someone asks what they mean.

Choose several words your committee has already used to describe the pastor you hope to call.

Examples might include:

Dynamic

Pastoral

Strong leader

Good preacher

Collaborative

Energetic

Spiritual

Innovative

Experienced

Relatable

Mission-minded

Write one of your words here:

We want someone who is: _____

Now ask:

What would we actually see this pastor doing that would cause us to use this word?

Can we describe an example?

Do we all mean approximately the same thing by this word?

Repeat the exercise with other words that appear frequently in your conversations.

Part Five — What Are We Assuming About Our Congregation?

Committees make assumptions not only about candidates, but also about themselves.

Complete these sentences together.

We sometimes say:

"Our congregation is…"

What evidence supports that description?

We believe our congregation wants:

How do we know?

We believe our congregation needs:

What have we heard during the transition that leads us to that conclusion?

We believe our community needs:

Who in the community have we listened to?

We expect our next pastor to:

Which of these expectations properly belong to the pastor?

Which belong to the congregation?

Which will require partnership?

Part Six — What Might Surprise Us?

Discuss together:

What kind of candidate might we overlook because they do not immediately match our expectations?

What experience or background might look unfamiliar but deserve greater curiosity?

Where might our congregation benefit from gifts we have not thought to ask for?

What expectations are we willing to hold lightly enough for God to surprise us?

A Question to Carry Throughout the Search

When you find yourselves strongly attracted to—or quickly dismissing—a candidate, pause and ask:

What are we responding to, and what might we be assuming?

Then stay curious.

Leader's Note

The purpose of this exercise is not to eliminate preferences; that is neither possible nor necessary.

It is to make them visible.

Return to this worksheet periodically, especially when a candidate generates unusually strong enthusiasm or resistance.

Sometimes those reactions reveal something important about the candidate.

Sometimes they reveal something important about us.

Faithful discernment requires the humility to remain curious about both.

FM 1.6

Confidentiality Agreement

Purpose

Pastoral searches depend upon trust.

Candidates may be exploring a call while faithfully serving another congregation. Their congregation, colleagues, staff, or family may not know they are considering a move. Premature disclosure can damage relationships, disrupt ministry, and place candidates in difficult personal and professional situations.

Committee conversations also require trust. Members need freedom to ask questions, express uncertainty, change their minds, and disagree without wondering whether unfinished conversations will be repeated elsewhere.

Confidentiality is more than good procedure.

It is an act of Christian care.

This agreement establishes shared expectations for protecting candidates, one another, the congregation, and the integrity of the discernment process.

Adapt it as necessary to the requirements of your denomination and governing body.

Our Confidentiality Agreement

As members of the Search Team, we understand that our work gives us access to personal, professional, and confidential information.

We agree to receive that information with care and use it only for the purpose for which it was entrusted to us.

We Will Protect Candidate Confidentiality

We will not disclose the identity of a candidate outside those persons authorized to participate in the search process.

This includes:

☐ Candidate names.

☐ Photographs.

☐ Pastoral Discernment Profiles, résumés, and other application materials.

☐ Current or previous congregations.

☐ Family information.

☐ Interview conversations.

☐ References and reference conversations.

☐ Information discovered during the search.

☐ Whether a particular candidate remains under consideration.

☐ Committee impressions or opinions about candidates.

We Will Protect Committee Conversations

Honest discernment requires honest conversation.

Committee members must be able to say:

“I am uncertain.”

“I see this differently.”

“I have a concern.”

“I changed my mind.”

“I think we need another conversation.”

We therefore agree not to attribute individual members' comments, opinions, concerns, disagreements, or preliminary decisions outside the committee.

Our conversations will remain within the Search Team unless we agree that particular information should be communicated elsewhere.

We Will Not Conduct Independent Investigations

Curiosity about candidates is natural.

Independent investigation can easily violate trust.

Unless specifically authorized as part of the committee's agreed process, we will not:

☐ Contact a candidate's congregation.

☐ Contact church members, staff members, colleagues, or employers.

☐ Contact references other than those authorized by the candidate.

☐ Ask friends or acquaintances for information about a candidate.

☐ Use personal connections to conduct informal background inquiries.

☐ Share a candidate's name in order to learn “what someone knows.”

If additional information or another reference would be helpful, we will discuss the need as a committee and seek the candidate's permission when appropriate.

We Will Use Online Information Responsibly

Some information about pastors is publicly available.

Sermons, worship services, articles, blogs, church websites, denominational records, and social media may naturally become part of a search.

We agree that publicly available information will be considered thoughtfully and in context.

We will not use online searching as a substitute for conversation.

When something raises a question, whenever appropriate we will give the candidate an opportunity to provide context rather than drawing conclusions from an isolated post, quotation, sermon, photograph, or event.

We Will Protect Documents and Electronic Information

Confidentiality applies to information wherever it is stored.

We agree to:

☐ Keep printed candidate materials secure.

☐ Avoid leaving candidate information in public or shared spaces.

☐ Protect electronic files and accounts appropriately.

☐ Be thoughtful when forwarding emails or documents.

☐ Avoid discussing candidates through communication channels accessible to people outside the committee.

☐ Dispose of confidential materials appropriately when they are no longer needed.

We Will Be Careful in Ordinary Conversation

Confidentiality is most often compromised not through deliberate misconduct but through casual conversation.

Someone asks:

“How is the search going?”

“Have you found anyone good?”

“Are you interviewing yet?”

“Do I know any of the candidates?”

We will answer without revealing confidential information.

A simple response may be:

“The committee is making progress, and we are grateful for your prayers. We will share information with the congregation when we are able to do so.”

We will not use spouses, family members, close friends, or other church members as sounding boards for confidential committee matters.

Confidentiality Does Not Mean Secrecy About Everything

A healthy search process should communicate regularly with the congregation.

The committee can often share:

where it is in the general search process

what work has been completed

what the next stage will involve

changes in the anticipated timeline

prayer requests

appropriate celebrations of progress

The committee should communicate as openly as possible about the **process** while remaining appropriately confidential about the **people** involved.

When Confidentiality Requirements Change

There may come a stage when a candidate's identity can or must be shared with others.

Depending upon your denomination and search process, this may include:

governing body representatives

staff

church officers

congregational leaders

members of the congregation

participants in a candidating weekend

The Search Team will determine when disclosure is appropriate and follow denominational requirements.

Whenever possible, the candidate should know **who will receive their information and when** before it is shared.

If Confidentiality Is Accidentally Broken

Mistakes can happen.

If confidential information is disclosed accidentally, do not try to hide it.

Notify the committee chair promptly.

The committee can then determine:

what information was disclosed

who received it

whether the candidate should be informed

whether denominational leadership should be consulted

what steps can reduce further disclosure

what the committee can learn from the experience

Trust is strengthened when mistakes are handled honestly.

Our Commitment

We understand that confidential information has been entrusted to us because of our service on the Search Team.

We agree to protect it throughout the search and after our committee's work has concluded.

We will practice confidentiality not merely because it is required, but because the people whose stories we receive deserve our respect and care.

Congregation: _____

Committee Member	Signature	Date

Leader's Note

A helpful rule is:

Be open about the process. Be careful with people's stories.

Confidentiality should never become an excuse for keeping the congregation unnecessarily uninformed. Nor does a desire for transparency permit the committee to disclose information candidates have entrusted to its care.

When you are uncertain whether something may be shared, do not guess. Ask the committee chair or appropriate denominational leader.

FM 1.7

Search Timeline Planner

Purpose

Pastoral searches take time, and their pace is rarely even.

Some stages move quickly. Others require waiting—for profiles, interviews, references, denominational approvals, candidate schedules, or simply for discernment to mature.

A timeline helps the committee see the whole journey without turning it into a race.

Use this planner early to identify major stages, responsibilities, and anticipated dates. Review it regularly and revise it as circumstances change.

The dates you enter are **planning dates, not promises**.

A faithful search is not one that finishes on schedule, but one that keeps moving thoughtfully while allowing enough time for prayer, conversation, and discernment.

Begin with What You Know

Before creating your timeline, identify dates or requirements that are already established.

Search Team commissioned or begins work:

Ministry Discernment Profile available:

Date candidate referrals or applications may begin:

Denominational or governing body requirements we need to include:

Congregational meetings or approvals that may be required:

Known dates that could affect the search:

Include holidays, summer schedules, major church events, denominational meetings, and other times when committee members or candidates may be unavailable.

Our Search Timeline

Stage One — Preparing the Search Team

During this stage we will:

☐ Establish committee roles.

☐ Adopt our Search Team Covenant.

☐ Establish confidentiality practices.

☐ Discuss our hopes and assumptions.

☐ Establish our meeting rhythm.

☐ Review denominational requirements.

☐ Establish communication with appropriate denominational leaders.

We hope to complete this stage by:

Who is responsible for keeping us moving?

Stage Two — Preparing to Receive Candidates

Before reviewing candidates, we will:

☐ Review the Ministry Discernment Profile together.

☐ Identify important themes in the congregation's story.

☐ Review the gifts and leadership needs identified during congregational discernment.

☐ Establish how candidate materials will be received and distributed.

☐ Determine how the committee will initially review Pastoral Discernment Profiles.

☐ Prepare a process for communicating with candidates.

Anticipated beginning: _____ ☐

Anticipated completion: _____ ☐

Stage Three — Receiving and Reading Profiles

During this stage we will:

☐ Receive candidate profiles or referrals.

☐ Read profiles individually.

☐ Share observations as a committee.

☐ Look for patterns and questions.

☐ Determine which conversations should continue.

☐ Communicate promptly with candidates.

Anticipated beginning: _____ ☐

Review progress on: _____ ☐

Review progress again on: _____ ☐

Remember

This stage may last for some time, and that is not necessarily a problem.

Do not postpone promising conversations simply because you are waiting to see who else might appear.

Stage Four — First Conversations

For candidates with whom we wish to continue, we will:

☐ Contact the candidate.

☐ Schedule the first interview.

☐ Prepare together.

☐ Conduct the interview.

☐ Allow generous time for the candidate's questions.

☐ Reflect together after the conversation.

☐ Communicate the next step promptly.

We hope to begin first interviews by:

Our usual goal for responding after an interview:

Stage Five — Continuing Conversations

As mutual discernment deepens, we may:

☐ Schedule second or subsequent interviews.

☐ Explore questions raised by earlier conversations.

☐ Discuss theology and congregational culture.

☐ Invite deeper conversation about leadership and ministry.

☐ Continue answering the candidate's questions.

☐ Clarify practical expectations.

☐ Determine which relationships should continue toward an interview weekend.

Anticipated period:
From to

Stage Six — Interview Weekend

When appropriate within our denomination's process, we will:

☐ Identify possible dates with the candidate.

☐ Confirm confidentiality requirements.

☐ Prepare an itinerary.

☐ Arrange travel.

☐ Arrange lodging.

☐ Plan meals and hospitality.

☐ Arrange community experiences.

☐ Schedule appropriate meetings.

☐ Include family when appropriate.

☐ Provide time for rest and private discernment.

Possible dates:

First choice: _____

Second choice: _____

Third choice: _____

Person coordinating logistics:

Stage Seven — References and Final Discernment

At the appropriate point in our process, we will:

☐ Obtain the candidate's authorization for reference conversations.

☐ Contact authorized references.

☐ Listen for patterns across reference conversations.

☐ Identify any remaining questions.

☐ Seek additional conversation with the candidate if necessary.

☐ Pray.

☐ Allow time for individual reflection.

☐ Discern together whether to recommend a call.

Anticipated period:
From to

Stage Eight — Extending the Call

If the committee discerns a call, we will:

☐ Confirm required denominational procedures.

☐ Prepare the terms of call.

☐ Extend the invitation personally.

☐ Allow the candidate time for continued discernment.

☐ Complete required approvals.

☐ Communicate with other candidates promptly and graciously.

Anticipated period:
From to

Stage Nine — Preparing for the Announcement

After the call has been accepted and appropriate approvals have been completed:

☐ Determine when confidentiality may be lifted.

☐ Prepare communication with the congregation.

☐ Share the story of the search appropriately.

☐ Provide information about the new pastor and family with their permission.

☐ Prepare for any required congregational meeting or candidating event.

☐ Begin planning the transition to *Beginning Ministry Together*.

Possible announcement date:

Possible congregational meeting/candidating date:

Our Search at a Glance

Stage	Target Date	Actual Date	Notes
Search Team prepared			
Ready to receive candidates			
Candidate review begins			
First interviews begin			
Continuing interviews			
Interview weekend			
References completed			
Final discernment			
Call extended			
Call accepted			
Required approvals completed			
Congregation informed			
New ministry begins			

Communication Along the Way

Candidates and congregations can tolerate waiting more easily than uncertainty.

As you create your timeline, decide how you will communicate even when there is little new information to report.

With Candidates

Who communicates?

How quickly will we acknowledge candidate communications?

How often will we update candidates when the process takes longer than expected?

With the Congregation

Who communicates?

How often will we provide general search updates?

How will updates be shared?

☐ Worship announcements

☐ Newsletter

☐ Email

☐ Website

☐ Congregational meetings

☐ Other: _____

Remember:

You can communicate progress without compromising confidentiality.

When the Timeline Changes

Expect it to change.

A candidate may need another week.

Committee members may be unavailable.

A reference may be difficult to reach.

A denominational approval may take longer than expected.

The committee may simply realize it is not ready to decide.

When the timeline changes, ask:

What caused the change?

Does anything require action?

Who needs to know?

What is our new expectation?

Then communicate it.

Leader's Note

A timeline should create **clarity without creating pressure**.

Use it to prevent avoidable delays, forgotten responsibilities, and long periods of silence—not to force discernment to conform to a calendar.

There is an important difference between:

“We need to keep moving.”

and

“We need to finish.”

Keep moving.

Communicate well.

Do the work that belongs to this stage of the journey.

Chapter Two — Reading with the Eyes of Discernment

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 2.1

First Reading Worksheet

Purpose

A Pastoral Discernment Profile is an introduction, not a conclusion. Your first reading should awaken curiosity about the pastor whose story you are encountering, not decide whether this person should become your next pastor—or whether they meet every expectation you brought into the search.
Read first to notice.

What catches your attention? What themes appear? What surprises you? What makes you curious? What would you like to hear more about?

Complete this worksheet individually before discussing the profile with the committee.

Candidate

Candidate: _____

Date reviewed: _____

Reviewed by:

---

1. First Impressions

After reading the entire profile once, put it aside.

Without returning to it yet, write down what you remember.

What stayed with you?

What surprised you?

What made you curious?

What do you find yourself wanting to know more about?

Do not evaluate these impressions yet. Simply record them.

2. Read Again for the Story

Now return to the profile and read it more slowly.

This time, look beyond positions, dates, degrees, and accomplishments.

Listen for the pastor's story.

Vocation

What seems to give this pastor energy or joy?

What kinds of ministry seem especially meaningful to them?

What appears to matter deeply to this person?

Formation

What experiences seem to have shaped this pastor?

What challenges, disappointments, or changes have influenced their ministry?

Where do you notice learning or growth?

Relationships

How does the candidate speak about other people?

What do you notice about the way they describe congregations they have served?

Where do you see evidence of collaboration or developing others?

Ministry

What kinds of ministry appear repeatedly in this pastor's story?

☐ Preaching and worship

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Teaching and formation

☐ Mission

☐ Community engagement

☐ Congregational change

☐ Leadership development

☐ Staff leadership

☐ Administration

☐ Stewardship

☐ Evangelism

☐ Children and youth

☐ Other: _____

What seems particularly important?

3. Words and Phrases Worth Noticing

Candidates sometimes reveal important things through the language they use repeatedly.

Record words, phrases, images, or ideas that caught your attention.

Word or phrase:

Why did I notice it?

Word or phrase:

Why did I notice it?

Word or phrase:

Why did I notice it?

Do any of these begin to suggest a pattern?

4. What Gifts Do I Notice?

Based only upon what the candidate has actually written, what gifts seem visible?

☐ Curiosity

☐ Humility

☐ Compassion

☐ Resilience

☐ Collaboration

☐ Leadership

☐ Communication

☐ Creativity

☐ Adaptability

☐ Teaching

☐ Pastoral presence

☐ Community engagement

☐ Developing other leaders

☐ Other: _____

What in the profile led you to notice these gifts?

Distinguish between what the profile actually shows and what you may be assuming from what you read.

5. Where Did I Make Assumptions?

Notice your own reactions.

Something I found immediately attractive:

Why?

Something that immediately concerned me:

Why?

Something I may be interpreting without enough information:

Did anything activate one of the preferences or assumptions I identified in FM 1.5?

---

6. What Don't I Know Yet?

A profile cannot tell you everything. List what you would need to understand better before forming a judgment.

I would like to know more about:

---

7. Turn Curiosity Into Questions

Do not write polished interview questions yet. Simply identify the conversations you would like to have.

I noticed:

That makes me curious about:

I would like to hear the story of:

I noticed:

That makes me curious about:

I would like to hear the story of:

I noticed:

That makes me curious about:

I would like to hear the story of:

These observations will become useful later when you use **FM 2.3 — From Observation to Conversation** and the interview resources in FM 4.

8. Before the Committee Discusses the Candidate

Complete these sentences.

The strongest theme I noticed was:

Something that gave me energy or hope was:

Something I want to understand better is:

One assumption I need to hold lightly is:

One question this profile awakened in me is:

When the Committee Gathers

Do not begin with:

“What did everyone think?”

Begin with:

“What did everyone notice?”

Give every committee member an opportunity to answer before open discussion begins.

Record the committee's shared observations:

Patterns we noticed together:

Things we interpreted differently:

Questions we want to carry forward:

Leader's Note

The purpose of the first reading is not to decide whether you have found your next pastor.

It is to decide whether you have encountered a story worth exploring further.

A profile may raise concerns or create excitement. Pay attention to both, but neither reaction is yet discernment.

At this stage, keep returning to three questions:

What did we notice?

What are we assuming?

What are we curious about?

The profile has introduced you to a pastor.

Now decide whether you would like to begin a conversation.

FM 2.2

Reading for Patterns

Purpose

One experience tells you something about a pastor. A pattern tells you much more.

Pastoral Discernment Profiles contain many individual details: positions, ministries, accomplishments, challenges, theological convictions, leadership experiences, and stories from congregational life. This worksheet asks you to step back from those details and notice: What keeps appearing?

Patterns can reveal the deeper instincts, values, gifts, and formation that shape a pastor's ministry.

Complete this worksheet after **FM 2.1 — First Reading Worksheet**. You may complete it individually or use it together as a committee.

Candidate

Candidate: _____

Date: _____

Reviewed by:

---

1. What Keeps Appearing?

Return to the profile and look for themes that appear more than once.

Do not begin by deciding whether they are strengths or weaknesses. Simply notice them.

Recurring ministries or interests

☐ Preaching and worship

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Teaching and spiritual formation

☐ Mission

☐ Community engagement

☐ Leadership development

☐ Congregational change

☐ Staff leadership

☐ Administration

☐ Stewardship

☐ Children and youth

☐ Ecumenical or community partnerships

☐ Other: _____

What appears repeatedly?

Where do you see it?

---

2. Listen for Recurring Values

What seems to matter to this pastor?

Look for values that appear across several different stories or experiences.

☐ Relationships

☐ Collaboration

☐ Spiritual formation

☐ Hospitality

☐ Justice

☐ Mission

☐ Community

☐ Innovation

☐ Tradition

☐ Learning

☐ Developing others

☐ Reconciliation

☐ Inclusion

☐ Evangelism

☐ Service

☐ Other: _____

A value I notice:

Evidence from the profile:

Another value I notice:

Evidence from the profile:

---

3. Listen for Leadership Patterns

Rather than asking whether this person is a "strong leader," ask how they appear to lead.

When describing ministry, does the candidate tend to:

☐ Begin by listening.

☐ Gather people around a question.

☐ Develop a vision.

☐ Build teams.

☐ Develop other leaders.

☐ Make decisions independently.

☐ Seek consensus.

☐ Experiment with new approaches.

☐ Preserve valued traditions.

☐ Build community partnerships.

☐ Teach before leading change.

☐ Respond quickly to problems.

☐ Reflect before acting.

☐ Other: _____

What leadership pattern seems to be emerging?

What examples support that observation?

What would we like to understand better?

---

4. Listen for Formation

Accomplishments tell you what happened. Formation asks what happened to the pastor through those experiences.

Look for places where the candidate describes:

☐ Something learned.

☐ A mistake acknowledged.

☐ An assumption reconsidered.

☐ A disappointment endured.

☐ A mentor or colleague who influenced them.

☐ A congregation that changed them.

☐ A difficult experience that produced growth.

☐ A theological conviction that deepened.

☐ A new understanding of ministry.

☐ A change in leadership practice.

Experiences that seem to have formed this pastor:

What appears to have been learned?

How does that learning appear elsewhere in the profile?

---

5. Listen for How the Candidate Talks About People

Language about other people can reveal important patterns.

Notice how the candidate speaks about:

Congregations previously served

Church members

Staff and colleagues

People with whom they disagreed

Community members

Other pastors or leaders

What pattern do you notice?

☐ Gratitude

☐ Respect

☐ Affection

☐ Curiosity

☐ Collaboration

☐ Frustration

☐ Blame

☐ Humility

☐ Generosity

☐ Distance

☐ Other: _____

What would you like to explore in conversation?

---

6. Listen for How the Candidate Talks About Challenges

Most pastors can describe successful ministries.

Pay particular attention to stories in which things were difficult.

When challenges appear, does the candidate tend to describe:

☐ What others did.

☐ What they themselves did.

☐ What they learned.

☐ How relationships were affected.

☐ How they sought help.

☐ How the congregation participated.

☐ What they would do differently.

☐ How their theology shaped their response.

☐ How the experience changed them.

What do you notice?

Is there enough information to recognize a pattern?

☐ Yes

☐ Not yet

If not, what might you want to ask?

---

7. Notice Repeated Language

Return to words or phrases you identified in FM 2.1.

Does the candidate repeatedly use language such as:

we

together

I

they

learned

discovered

built

changed

served

listened

led

developed

community

mission

discipleship

grace

call

Or other recurring words?

Words or phrases that appear repeatedly:

What might this language suggest?

Repeated language does not prove anything. Let it awaken curiosity.

8. Notice What Is Missing

Patterns include absences as well as repetitions.

After reading the profile several times, is there an area you expected to encounter but did not?

Perhaps you heard little about:

☐ Worship.

☐ Preaching.

☐ Pastoral care.

☐ Mission.

☐ Community engagement.

☐ Leadership.

☐ Staff relationships.

☐ Conflict or differences.

☐ Spiritual formation.

☐ Theology.

☐ Developing others.

☐ Personal learning or growth.

☐ Other: _____

An absence is not necessarily a concern; a profile has limited space. Treat what is missing as an invitation to ask, not a reason to conclude.

Something we would like to hear more about:

---

9. Distinguish a Pattern from a Single Example

Before naming something as a pattern, ask:

Have we seen this more than once?

Does it appear in different contexts?

Are we interpreting what the candidate actually wrote, or filling in the story ourselves?

Use the following table to test your observations.

Possible Pattern	Evidence #1	Evidence #2	Worth Exploring?
			☐
			☐

Possible Pattern	Evidence #1	Evidence #2	Worth Exploring?
			☐
			☐
			☐

If you cannot identify more than one piece of evidence, call it an **observation**, not yet a pattern.

10. Our Emerging Picture

After completing the worksheet, step back.

Do not ask yet:

"Is this our pastor?"

Ask:

What seems to bring this pastor alive?

What seems to matter deeply to them?

How does this person appear to approach leadership?

What experiences seem to have formed them?

What recurring gifts do we notice?

What recurring questions or concerns do we notice?

What do we still not understand?

---

11. Three Patterns to Carry Into Conversation

Choose no more than three patterns that deserve further exploration.

Pattern One

We noticed:

We would like to understand:

Pattern Two

We noticed:

We would like to understand:

Pattern Three

We noticed:

We would like to understand:

Do not turn these into interview questions yet.

That is the work of FM 2.3 — From Observation to Conversation.

Leader's Note

Patterns are clues, not conclusions.

A repeated emphasis on collaboration may reflect a deeply collaborative leader—or simply the experiences the candidate chose to include in a limited profile. An apparent absence may mean something important—or merely that there was not room to tell that story.

Reading for patterns is not an attempt to diagnose a candidate from a document. It is a way to become more curious.

The movement is simple:

Notice → Look for Patterns → Become Curious → Ask

The interview will give the pastor an opportunity to tell the rest of the story.

FM 2.3

From Observation to Conversation

Purpose

The best interview questions often come not from a prepared list, but from paying attention.

Something in a candidate's Pastoral Discernment Profile catches your attention. A phrase appears several times. A ministry experience raises your curiosity. A pattern begins to emerge. Something surprises you. Something is missing.

That observation becomes the beginning of a question.

This worksheet will help you move from:

What did we notice?

to:

What would we like to understand?

to:

What might we ask?

The goal is not clever questions, but conversations that allow candidates to tell their stories.

The Basic Movement

Use this simple pattern:

OBSERVATION → CURIOSITY → INVITATION

Observation

What did you actually notice?

Curiosity

What would you like to understand better?

Invitation

What question would invite the candidate to tell you more?

For example:

Observation

The candidate refers several times to helping congregations develop new community partnerships.

Curiosity

How does this pastor begin that work?

Invitation

Tell us about one of those partnerships. How did it begin, and what did you learn along the way?

One observation has become a conversation.

1. Begin With What You Actually Know

Write an observation from the candidate's profile.

I noticed:

Now test your observation.

Is this something the candidate actually wrote or described?

☐ Yes

☐ Not entirely—I may be interpreting it.

If you are interpreting, return to the profile and rewrite the observation using only what you can actually see.

Revised observation:

This distinction matters. Compare:

Observation:
"The candidate described three ministries involving community organizations."

with:

Interpretation:
"The candidate is an excellent community leader."

The first gives you something to explore; the second has already reached a conclusion.

2. Become Curious

Now ask:

What about this observation would I like to understand better?

Perhaps you are curious about:

☐ How something began.

☐ Why the pastor made a particular choice.

☐ Who else was involved.

☐ What resistance occurred.

☐ What surprised them.

☐ What they learned.

☐ What they would do differently.

☐ How the experience affected the congregation.

☐ How the experience affected the pastor.

☐ How their faith shaped their response.

☐ What happened afterward.

☐ Something else:

3. Turn Curiosity Into an Invitation

Now create a question that invites a story.

Useful beginnings include:

Tell us about a time when…

Tell us the story of…

You mentioned… Tell us more about that.

How did that begin?

What happened next?

What surprised you?

Who else became involved?

What did you learn?

How did that experience change you?

Looking back, what would you do differently?

Our question:

4. Practice the Movement

Use observations from FM 2.1 and FM 2.2.

Observation One

We noticed:

We are curious about:

We might ask:

Observation Two

We noticed:

We are curious about:

We might ask:

Observation Three

We noticed:

We are curious about:

We might ask:

Observation Four

We noticed:

We are curious about:

We might ask:

---

5. Turn General Questions Into Story Questions

Many common interview questions ask candidates to describe their philosophy. Those questions can be useful, but stories often reveal much more.

Practice turning a general question into an invitation to tell a story.

Instead of:

How do you handle disagreement?

Try:

Tell us about a disagreement in a congregation that became an important experience for you. What happened, and what did you learn?

Instead of:

What is your leadership style?

Try:

Tell us about a time you helped a group make an important decision when people initially saw the situation differently. How did you approach it?

Instead of:

Are you committed to mission?

Try:

Tell us about a ministry that changed the way you understand the Church's mission.

Instead of:

How do you involve laypeople?

Try:

Tell us about someone whose gifts you helped discover or develop. What did you notice in them, and what happened?

Instead of:

How do you approach change?

Try:

Tell us about a change you helped a congregation navigate. What did you learn about the congregation—and about yourself?

Now Try Your Own

General question:

Story invitation:

General question:

Story invitation:

---

6. Follow the Story

You do not need to anticipate every follow-up question. Listen to the answer, then become curious again.

Suppose the candidate says:

"At first, several members strongly resisted the idea."

You might ask:

What do you think they were concerned about?

Or:

How did you respond to that resistance?

Or:

Did your understanding of their concerns change as you listened?

Suppose the candidate says:

"Eventually I realized I had moved too quickly."

You might ask:

What helped you recognize that?

Or:

What did you do once you realized it?

Or:

How has that experience affected the way you lead now?

The candidate's answer creates the next question.

7. Listen for Doors

Certain words and phrases often open doors to deeper conversation.

Listen for:

"I learned…"

Ask:
What did you learn?

"We struggled…"

Ask:
What made that difficult?

"I realized…"

Ask:
What led you to that realization?

"The congregation surprised me…"

Ask:
How?

"Looking back…"

Ask:
What do you see differently now?

"We decided…"

Ask:
How was that decision made?

“That changed my ministry…”

Ask:
What changed?

These are not formulas, but invitations to remain curious.

8. Questions That Explore Formation

Sometimes the most important part of a story is not what the pastor accomplished, but how the pastor was changed.

After hearing a significant ministry story, consider asking:

What did that experience teach you about ministry?

What did it teach you about yourself?

Did anything change in your understanding of God?

Who helped you through that experience?

What would you do differently today?

How does that experience continue to shape the way you lead?

These questions help you listen for formation rather than simply achievement.

9. Be Careful With “Why?”

“Why?” can be an important question, but it can also sound like a demand for justification.

Compare:

Why did you do that?

with:

What led you to make that decision?

Or:

Help us understand what you were considering at that point.

The purpose is not to soften every difficult question, but to ask it in a way that encourages reflection rather than defensiveness.

10. Do Not Put the Answer in the Question

Sometimes committees unintentionally reveal the answer they hope to hear.

For example:

“We believe pastors should empower lay leadership. How do you empower lay leaders?”

The candidate now knows what you want.

Instead ask:

“Tell us about the relationship between your leadership and the leadership of church members in a congregation you have served.”

Then listen.

Similarly, instead of:

“How important is community mission to you?”

ask:

“Tell us about the relationship between a congregation you have served and its surrounding community.”

Questions should invite discovery, not coach candidates toward the preferred response.

11. Ask Fewer Questions

A good conversation does not require twenty excellent questions. It may require five.

One thoughtful question followed by genuine curiosity can reveal far more than a rapid sequence of prepared questions.

Before an interview, identify the conversations that matter most.

Conversation we want to have:

Opening question:

Conversation we want to have:

Opening question:

Conversation we want to have:

Opening question:

Conversation we want to have:

Opening question:

Then listen well enough to discover the questions that come next.

12. Our Questions for This Candidate

After working through the candidate's profile and the patterns you have noticed, identify the questions that seem most important for your first conversation.

Question One

What we noticed:

What we want to understand:

Our opening question:

Question Two

What we noticed:

What we want to understand:

Our opening question:

Question Three

What we noticed:

What we want to understand:

Our opening question:

Question Four

What we noticed:

What we want to understand:

Our opening question:

Question Five

What we noticed:

What we want to understand:

Our opening question:

Before You Ask

Look at each question one final time.

Ask:

☐ Does this question arise from something we genuinely want to understand?

☐ Does it invite reflection rather than a rehearsed answer?

☐ Does it invite a story when a story would help?

☐ Have we avoided putting our preferred answer into the question?

☐ Are we prepared to listen rather than immediately move to the next question?

☐ Are we willing to follow the conversation somewhere we did not expect?

If so, you are ready.

Leader's Note

Do not become so attached to your prepared questions that you miss the conversation happening in front of you.

Your questions are starting points. If a candidate says something unexpected that deserves another question, follow it.

Someone may tell a story that answers three questions you planned to ask later. Do not ask them anyway simply because they are on your list.

The craft is straightforward:

Notice something.

Become curious.

Invite the story.

Listen.

Become curious again.

That is how an interview begins becoming a conversation.

FM 2.4

Candidate Conversation Notes

Purpose

Good notes help a committee remember; poor notes can quietly become evaluations.

This worksheet captures what you are learning as conversations develop without reducing a candidate to ratings, scores, or isolated comments.

Use it to record significant stories, observations, recurring patterns, remaining questions, and areas to explore in future conversations.

You do not need to record everything a candidate says. Listen first. Write down what will help you remember.

Candidate

Candidate:

Date:

Conversation:

☐ First interview

☐ Second interview

☐ Follow-up conversation

☐ Informal conversation

☐ Other:

Committee member completing notes:

---

1. Before the Conversation

From our previous reading and discussion, what are we especially curious about?

We want to understand:

Patterns we want to explore:

Questions we hope this conversation will help us answer:

2. Stories We Heard

Record significant stories rather than attempting to transcribe answers.

Story or experience:

What happened?

What did the candidate seem to learn from it?

What did this make us curious about?

Story or experience:

What happened?

What did the candidate seem to learn from it?

What did this make us curious about?

Story or experience:

What happened?

What did the candidate seem to learn from it?

What did this make us curious about?

3. Things Worth Remembering

What statements, ideas, images, or phrases caught your attention?

Why did they stand out?

4. What Did We Notice?

Record observations before interpretations.

I noticed:

I noticed:

I noticed:

I noticed:

Remember the distinction:

Observation:
"The candidate asked several questions about our community partnerships."

Interpretation:
"The candidate will be strong in community ministry."

Record the first.

Explore the second.

---

5. What Are We Beginning to Learn About Formation?

What experiences seem to have shaped this pastor?

What have they learned through ministry?

Where did we hear evidence of growth or change?

How do they speak about mistakes, disappointments, or experiences that did not go as planned?

What people or communities appear to have influenced them?

---

6. What Are We Beginning to Learn About Leadership?

What did we hear about how this pastor:

Listens?

Makes decisions?

Works with others?

Develops other leaders?

Responds to differences?

Approaches change?

Engages the wider community?

Do not feel obligated to complete every section. Record only what the conversation actually revealed.

---

7. Patterns We May Be Seeing

Compare this conversation with the candidate's profile and previous conversations.

Something we have now noticed more than once:

Where else have we seen or heard it?

Another possible pattern:

Where else have we seen or heard it?

A pattern from the profile that this conversation strengthened:

A pattern we thought we saw that now seems less certain:

Remember:

A pattern is something observed repeatedly across different stories, conversations, or experiences.

8. What Surprised Us?

Something we did not expect:

Something that challenged an assumption:

Something that caused us to see the candidate differently:

Something that caused us to see **our congregation** differently:

That last question matters.

Mutual discernment teaches congregations about themselves as well as about candidates.

---

9. What Did the Candidate Ask Us?

Candidate questions are part of discernment. Record the significant questions the candidate asked.

Question:

What might this tell us about what matters to the candidate?

Question:

What might this tell us about what matters to the candidate?

Question:

Did we answer fully?

☐ Yes

☐ We should return to this.

If we should return to it:

---

10. What Remains Unclear?

What do we still not understand?

What deserves another conversation?

Did anything concern us that needs context before we interpret it?

Is there something we are tempted to assume rather than ask?

11. Questions for the Next Conversation

Do not create another long interview list. Identify the conversations that naturally need to continue.

We would like to hear more about:

Possible question:

We would like to understand:

Possible question:

Something the candidate said made us curious about:

Possible follow-up:

---

12. After the Conversation

Before discussing whether the process should continue, allow each committee member to complete these sentences individually.

Something I learned:

Something that gave me hope or energy:

Something I want to understand better:

Something that concerns me:

Something I may be assuming:

One question I am carrying forward:

Committee Reflection

After everyone has had an opportunity to share observations:

What did several of us notice?

Where did we see things differently?

What patterns seem to be strengthening?

What questions remain?

What have we learned about ourselves?

Our Next Step

At this stage, the question is not:

“Should we call this pastor?”

The question is:

“Should this conversation continue?”

☐ Yes — we would like another conversation.

☐ Yes — but we need additional information first.

☐ We need more time for prayer and reflection.

☐ We have enough information to conclude the conversation.

Why?

What needs to happen next?

Who will communicate with the candidate?

By when?

Leader's Note

Do not let note-taking interfere with listening.

The candidate should experience people looking at them, responding to them, laughing with them, and following their story—not a committee staring down at worksheets.

Assigning one person to keep somewhat fuller notes may allow everyone else to record only a few observations.

And remember that notes preserve impressions long after the conversation has ended. Write with the same respect you would use if the candidate were sitting beside you reading what you wrote.

The purpose of these notes is not to build a case **for** or **against** someone.

They help you remember the story well enough to keep discerning it.

FM 2.5

Discernment Before the Interview

Purpose

You have read the candidate's Pastoral Discernment Profile, noticed themes and patterns, and identified questions and areas of curiosity. Now the committee must decide whether to begin a conversation.

This is an important decision, but it is also a limited one.

You are **not** deciding whether this person should become your pastor.

You are deciding whether there is enough possibility, curiosity, and potential connection to make a conversation worthwhile.

Use this guide after the committee has completed its initial review of a candidate and before extending an invitation for a first interview.

---

1. Begin With What You Know

Before discussing whether to interview the candidate, review what the committee has actually learned.

Gifts or strengths we noticed:

Patterns that caught our attention:

Experiences that seem particularly relevant to our congregation:

Things that made us curious:

Questions we would like an opportunity to ask:

2. What Do We Not Know?

A profile is necessarily incomplete.

Before treating missing information as a concern, ask whether the candidate simply has not yet had an opportunity to tell you.

We do not yet know enough about:

☐ Preaching and worship

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Leadership

☐ Mission

☐ Community engagement

☐ Spiritual formation

☐ Theology

☐ Staff relationships

☐ Working with volunteers

☐ Navigating differences

☐ Leading change

☐ Administration

☐ Stewardship

☐ Developing other leaders

☐ Other: _____

Which of these could reasonably be explored through conversation?

Remember:

Not knowing is not the same as discovering a problem. Sometimes it simply means you need to ask.

---

3. Name Concerns Carefully

If something in the profile concerns the committee, identify it specifically.

Our concern is:

What in the profile caused this concern?

Now ask:

Is this a fact, an interpretation, or an assumption?

☐ Fact — the profile clearly establishes this.

☐ Interpretation — we are drawing a conclusion from what we read.

☐ Assumption — we may be filling in information we do not have.

Could a conversation provide useful context?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ We are uncertain

If yes, what might we ask?

A concern worth exploring may be a reason **to interview**, not necessarily a reason to eliminate someone.

---

4. Check Your Assumptions

Return briefly to **FM 1.5 — Recognizing Our Assumptions**.

Ask whether your response to this candidate is being influenced by expectations you brought into the search.

Are we reacting to:

☐ Age or stage of ministry?

☐ Years of experience?

☐ Congregation size?

☐ Geographic background?

☐ Educational background?

☐ Career path?

☐ Previous position titles?

☐ Familiar or unfamiliar ministry experience?

☐ Preaching style?

☐ Personality as we imagine it from the profile?

☐ Similarity to a previous pastor?

☐ Difference from a previous pastor?

☐ Something else? _____

Then ask:

Does this matter to the ministry we are discerning, or does it simply matter to us?

What did this question uncover?

---

5. Beware of the Familiar Candidate

Sometimes a candidate feels immediately comfortable.

They sound like us.

They use familiar language.

Their experience resembles what we already know.

Their profile fits the picture we had in mind.

That may indicate genuine compatibility, or simply that the candidate confirms our expectations.

Ask:

What specifically attracts us to this candidate?

What evidence supports our enthusiasm?

Are we curious about this person, or have we already begun imagining them as our next pastor?

---

6. Beware of the Unfamiliar Candidate

Other candidates may not fit the picture you expected.

Their ministry path may be different.

Their experience may come from another kind of congregation.

Their gifts may appear in places you had not anticipated.

Their language or leadership approach may be unfamiliar.

Ask:

What specifically is causing our hesitation?

Does it reveal something important about the candidate?

Or something about our expectations?

What might we discover if we had one conversation?

Do not confuse unfamiliarity with incompatibility.

---

7. Return to the Congregation's Discernment

The search is not taking place in a vacuum.

Your congregation has already done important work identifying its story, context, vocation, and emerging ministry.

Ask:

Where do we see possible connections between this candidate's story and ours?

What gifts might this person bring to the ministry we believe lies ahead?

What gifts or experiences seem less evident?

Could those areas be explored in conversation?

The question is not whether the candidate matches every item on a list.

Look for the possibility of **partnership**.

---

8. Is There Enough Curiosity for a Conversation?

Pause before voting or deciding.

Allow each committee member to answer:

Something that interests me about this candidate:

Something I would like to understand better:

Something that gives me hesitation:

A question I would genuinely like to ask:

Then listen to one another.

You do not need identical reactions, only enough shared curiosity to determine whether another step is worthwhile.

---

9. Decide the Next Step

After prayer and conversation, choose the next faithful step.

Invite a Conversation

☐ **Yes.** There is enough possibility and curiosity to begin a conversation.

Seek More Information

☐ **Not yet.** We need information that can reasonably be obtained before deciding whether to interview.

What do we need?

How will we obtain it appropriately?

Allow More Time

☐ **Not yet.** We need additional prayer or committee conversation before deciding.

What remains unresolved?

Conclude the Conversation

☐ **No.** We have enough information to know that beginning an interview process would not serve either the candidate or the congregation well.

What leads us to that conclusion?

---

10. Before Contacting the Candidate

If the committee decides to invite an interview:

☐ Identify who will contact the candidate.

☐ Prepare a warm invitation.

☐ Explain where you are in the search process.

☐ Offer several possible interview times.

☐ Explain who will participate.

☐ Tell the candidate approximately how long the conversation will last.

☐ Provide any information they should review beforehand.

☐ Invite questions about the process.

☐ Explain when they can expect to hear from you afterward.

Person responsible:

Contact by:

---

11. If the Conversation Will Not Continue

Candidates deserve timely and gracious communication.

Do not leave someone wondering whether the committee is still considering them.

Follow your denominational procedures, and communicate as personally as the stage of the relationship warrants.

A candidate with whom you have never spoken may require only a brief communication.

A candidate with whom you have developed a relationship deserves something more personal.

In either case, remember:

Ending a search conversation is not a judgment about someone's call to ministry. It means only that you do not presently recognize the partnership you are seeking with this congregation.

Leader's Note

At this stage of the search, committees sometimes ask too large a question:

"Could this person be our next pastor?"

That question encourages premature conclusions. Ask something smaller:

"Is there enough here for a conversation?"

You are not extending a call; you are extending an invitation to talk.

A profile can tell you whether there are experiences, gifts, questions, and possibilities worth exploring.

Only a conversation can begin introducing you to the person behind the profile.

When there is genuine curiosity and no compelling reason not to continue, have the conversation.

Chapter Three — The First Conversation

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 3.1

First Interview Planning Worksheet

Purpose

The first interview is the beginning of a relationship. It is not the time to ask everything you might eventually want to know, nor is it an examination designed to elicit the right answers.

The purpose is simpler: begin a conversation worth continuing.

Good first interviews feel prepared without feeling scripted. The committee knows what it wants to explore, members understand their roles, the candidate has generous time for questions, and everyone leaves with a clearer sense of whether mutual discernment should continue.

Use this worksheet together before each first interview.

Candidate and Interview

Candidate:

Interview date:

Time:

Location / Zoom link:

Anticipated length:

Committee members participating:

Who will serve as primary host?

Who will keep time?

Who will take primary notes?

1. What Do We Already Know?

Before planning questions, briefly review what you learned through:

FM 2.1 — First Reading Worksheet

FM 2.2 — Reading for Patterns

FM 2.3 — From Observation to Conversation

FM 2.4 — Candidate Conversation Notes

FM 2.5 — Discernment Before the Interview

Do not repeat the entire profile review. Identify what matters for this conversation.

What especially interested us about this candidate?

What patterns have we begun to notice?

What do we genuinely want to understand better?

Is there anything in the profile that needs clarification?

2. What Do We Want This First Conversation to Accomplish?

Choose no more than three or four purposes.

By the end of this conversation, we hope to:

☐ Hear more of the candidate's story and sense of call.

☐ Understand what gives the candidate energy for ministry.

☐ Learn about experiences that have shaped their leadership.

☐ Explore an important pattern from the candidate's profile.

☐ Hear how the candidate understands ministry and vocation.

☐ Learn about an area particularly important to our congregation.

☐ Give the candidate a clearer understanding of our congregation.

☐ Give the candidate generous opportunity to ask questions.

☐ Determine whether both candidate and committee would like another conversation.

☐ Other: _____

The most important thing we hope to understand is:

_____

_____

_____

3. What Does the Candidate Need to Know About Us?

The candidate is also discerning.

What information would help them understand who they are meeting?

Consider briefly explaining:

☐ Who serves on the Search Team.

☐ How the committee was selected.

☐ Where you are in the search process.

☐ How long the search has been underway.

☐ The work the congregation has already done during the transition.

☐ What the congregation has been learning about itself.

☐ What you hope to explore in this conversation.

☐ What the next steps may be.

What should we make sure the candidate understands?

Do not use the first twenty minutes to present the congregation. Offer enough context to begin, then become curious about the candidate.

---

4. Plan the Opening

The first few minutes establish the character of the conversation.

Who will welcome the candidate?

Who will introduce the committee?

Who will explain the interview process and timeline?

Will we begin with prayer?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Who will lead?

If appropriate, use **FM 1.4 — Prayer Practices for Discernment**.

Our opening question will be:

Choose a question that helps the candidate begin talking comfortably about their story rather than immediately requiring a complex theological or leadership response.

For example:

“Tell us a little about the journey that has brought you to this point in your ministry.”

or:

“As you think about ministry right now, what is giving you life?”

---

5. Choose the Conversations That Matter

Do not build a long list of questions. Identify several conversations you genuinely want to have.

Conversation One

What do we want to explore?

Why does it matter?

Opening question:

Possible follow-up if needed:

Conversation Two

What do we want to explore?

Why does it matter?

Opening question:

Possible follow-up if needed:

Conversation Three

What do we want to explore?

Why does it matter?

Opening question:

Possible follow-up if needed:

Conversation Four — If Time Allows

What do we want to explore?

Opening question:

Remember:

You do not have to ask every question you prepared. If one opens an important conversation, stay with it.

---

6. Who Will Begin Each Conversation?

A conversational interview should not feel like committee members taking turns administering questions.

Still, some preparation prevents awkward pauses and ensures that one or two members do not dominate.

Conversation	Person Who Will Begin
Opening conversation	☐
Conversation One	☐
Conversation Two	☐
Conversation Three	☐
Candidate questions	☐
Closing	☐

The person listed begins the conversation; they do not own it.

Other committee members should listen, follow the story, and ask natural follow-up questions.

---

7. Plan the Time

A first interview needs breathing room.

For a **60–75 minute conversation**, a useful pattern might be:

Conversation	Approximate Time
Welcome and introductions	5–10 minutes
Candidate story/opening conversation	10 minutes
Committee conversations	25–30 minutes
Candidate questions	15–20 minutes
Next steps and closing	5 minutes

Our planned interview length:

We will begin candidate questions no later than:

That time matters.

Candidate questions are not what happens if the committee finishes early. They are part of the interview.

---

8. Prepare for Follow-Up Questions

Good follow-up questions usually cannot be planned in advance; they come from listening.

Remind yourselves of several simple invitations:

Tell us more about that.

What happened next?

What made that important?

Who else was involved?

How did you respond?

What surprised you?

What did you learn?

How did that experience change you?

What would you do differently now?

Do not rush to the next prepared question when curiosity invites you deeper into the one you just asked.

---

9. Prepare to Be Interviewed

At some point, the conversation should turn.

The candidate will have questions.

Before the interview, ask:

What questions do we expect the candidate may ask?

Is there anything about our congregation we may find difficult to answer?

Is there anything we need to be especially honest about?

Who is best prepared to respond to particular areas?

Do not worry about polished answers. Tell the truth about the congregation you actually are.

The resources in **FM 5 — When the Candidate Interviews You** will help you prepare more fully as conversations deepen.

---

10. Plan the Closing

Do not allow the interview simply to run out of time.

Before ending:

☐ Ask whether the candidate has any additional questions.

☐ Explain what happens next.

☐ Tell the candidate when they should expect to hear from you.

☐ Confirm the best way to communicate.

☐ Thank them for their time and openness.

☐ Close with prayer if appropriate.

Who will close the conversation?

What will we tell the candidate about next steps?

We will contact the candidate by:

Person responsible:

---

11. Plan What Happens Immediately Afterward

Do not begin with:

“Well, what did everybody think?”

Instead:

☐ Take a brief break if needed.

☐ Sit quietly for a minute or two.

☐ Pray.

☐ Allow members to make individual notes.

☐ Begin with **“What did you notice?”**

Use **FM 2.4 — Candidate Conversation Notes** to record the conversation and your emerging questions.

Will we discuss the interview immediately?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Will we make a decision that day?

☐ Yes, if appropriate

☐ No, we will allow time for reflection

When will we reconvene if needed?

Final Check Before the Interview

Candidate

☐ Knows the date and time.

☐ Knows how to join or where to arrive.

☐ Knows approximately how long the conversation will last.

☐ Knows who will participate.

☐ Knows where we are generally in the search process.

Committee

☐ Has reviewed the candidate's materials.

☐ Has identified what we genuinely want to understand.

☐ Has chosen a few opening questions.

☐ Knows who will begin each area of conversation.

☐ Has protected generous time for candidate questions.

☐ Knows who is keeping time.

☐ Knows who is taking primary notes.

☐ Knows who will communicate afterward.

Most Important

☐ We are prepared to abandon our plan when a better conversation emerges.

Leader's Note

A successful first interview is not one in which the committee gets through every question.

It is one in which both candidate and committee leave wanting—or not wanting—to continue the conversation for reasons they understand more clearly.

Prepare carefully, then hold the plan lightly. The person sitting across from you is more important than the questions on the page. Questions create the opening; listening creates the conversation.

FM 3.2

Suggested Interview Flow

Purpose

A first interview needs enough structure to help everyone feel prepared and enough freedom for a genuine conversation to emerge.

The flow below is a framework, not a script.

Adapt the timing to your committee and candidate. Conversations may move naturally from one subject to another. A candidate may answer a question you intended to ask later, or an unexpected story may deserve more time.

Follow the conversation rather than the clock whenever possible, while protecting enough time for the candidate to interview you.

For a first interview of approximately **60–75 minutes**, the following flow works well.

Before the Candidate Arrives

5–10 minutes before the interview

Gather early.

Do not use these final minutes to add more questions.

Instead:

☐ Confirm who will welcome the candidate.

☐ Confirm who will begin each planned area of conversation.

☐ Confirm who will keep time.

☐ Confirm who will take primary notes.

☐ Review when candidate questions should begin.

☐ Silence phones and eliminate distractions.

☐ Pray for the candidate by name.

Then stop preparing and be ready to receive the person.

---

1. Welcome

Approximately 2–3 minutes

The first task is hospitality.

Welcome the candidate warmly.

If meeting online, make certain everyone can hear and see one another comfortably before beginning.

A simple welcome is enough:

“We are grateful for the opportunity to meet you. We have been looking forward to this conversation.”

Do not begin with the entire search process or the congregation's history. Begin with welcome.

---

2. Introductions

Approximately 5 minutes

Introduce committee members briefly.

Each person might share:

Name

How long they have been part of the congregation

One sentence about their connection to the church or community

Keep introductions short; the candidate does not need seven miniature biographies.

Then invite the candidate to introduce themselves.

The candidate's résumé and profile have already introduced their credentials. This is an opportunity to meet the person.

---

3. Explain the Conversation

Approximately 2–3 minutes

Briefly describe what the candidate can expect.

For example:

“We hope this will feel more like a conversation than a formal interview. We have several things we would like to explore with you, and we hope you will ask questions along the way. We will also protect time near the end specifically for your questions.”

Explain:

☐ Approximately how long you will meet.

☐ Where the committee is in the search process.

☐ What will happen after the interview.

Then move into the conversation.

---

4. Opening Prayer

Approximately 2 minutes

Prayer establishes the character of the conversation. Keep it simple.

For example:

Gracious God, thank you for bringing us together. Give us curiosity, honesty, wisdom, and grace. Help us listen well to one another and remain attentive to your Spirit among us. Amen.

See **FM 1.4 — Prayer Practices for Discernment** for additional prayers.

---

5. Begin With the Candidate's Story

Approximately 10 minutes

Begin with a spacious question.

Good opening questions invite the candidate to speak about vocation rather than immediately demonstrate competence.

For example:

“Tell us something about the journey that has brought you to this point in your ministry.”

Or:

“As you think about your ministry at this point in your life, what is giving you energy?”

Or:

“What has been shaping your sense that it may be time to listen for another call?”

Then listen. Do not interrupt a meaningful story simply because another question is waiting.

---

6. Explore Two or Three Important Conversations

Approximately 25–30 minutes

Move into the areas identified in **FM 3.1 — First Interview Planning Worksheet**.

These should arise from the candidate's profile, your congregation's discernment, and what you genuinely want to understand.

Possible areas might include:

- vocation and sense of call
- experiences that have formed the candidate
- pastoral leadership
- preaching and worship
- mission and community engagement
- developing other leaders
- navigating change
- relationships
- congregational life

Use questions that invite stories.

Follow the stories that emerge.

Listen for openings such as:

“I learned…”

“We discovered…”

“That was difficult…”

“I was surprised…”

“Looking back…”

“I realized…”

When you hear one, become curious.

Ask:

“Tell us more about that.”

“What did you learn?”

“What happened next?”

“How did that change you?”

The best question may be one you never planned to ask.

---

7. Make the Turn

Around the 40–45 minute mark

Someone should intentionally watch the time.

Do not wait until five minutes remain to say:

“Do you have any questions for us?”

Make the turn deliberately.

For example:

“We have been asking you a lot of questions. We would like to turn the conversation around now. What would you like to know about us?”

Listen just as carefully as you did before.

The questions candidates ask often reveal:

- what matters to them
- what they are trying to discern
- what they have noticed about your congregation
- what they may be concerned about
- what kind of partnership they are imagining

Candidate questions are part of mutual discernment.

---

8. Let the Candidate Interview You

Approximately 15–20 minutes

Answer honestly.

Do not try to sell the congregation.

If the candidate asks about something difficult, resist the temptation to minimize it.

If you do not know the answer, say:

“We don't know.”

Or:

“We have different perspectives about that.”

Or:

“That is something we are still working through.”

Or:

“That's a good question. We need to find out.”

Those may be better than polished answers.

If a question deserves more time than remains, make a note to return to it.

The deeper work of preparing for candidate questions is addressed in **FM 5 — When the Candidate Interviews You**.

---

9. Invite Anything You Missed

Approximately 3–5 minutes

Before closing, ask one final question:

“Is there anything you hoped we would ask about that we haven't?”

Or:

“Is there anything important about you or your ministry that we haven't given you an opportunity to tell us?”

Then listen. Candidates sometimes use this opening to share something important your questions never reached.

---

10. Explain What Happens Next

Approximately 2–3 minutes

Do not leave the candidate wondering what comes next.

Tell them:

☐ What the committee will do next.

☐ Whether you are still conducting other interviews.

☐ When they should expect to hear from you.

☐ Who will contact them.

☐ How they can reach you if another question arises.

Do not promise a decision sooner than you can reasonably make one.

---

11. Close With Gratitude

Thank the candidate for:

- their time
- their openness
- the stories they shared
- the questions they asked

If appropriate, close with prayer.

Whether or not your journeys continue together, this conversation has involved another person faithfully discerning God's call. Treat the ending accordingly.

A 75-Minute Interview at a Glance

Time	Conversation
0–5 minutes	Welcome and introductions
5–8 minutes	Explain the conversation
8–10 minutes	Prayer
10–20 minutes	Candidate's story
20–45 minutes	Two or three areas of deeper conversation
45–65 minutes	Candidate interviews the committee
65–70 minutes	“What haven't we asked?”
70–75 minutes	Next steps, gratitude, and closing

The times are guides. Protect the candidate's time without protecting the schedule at the expense of the conversation.

Immediately After the Interview

Do not begin evaluating the candidate the moment the screen goes dark or the door closes.

First:

☐ Take a short break if needed.

☐ Sit quietly together.

☐ Pray.

☐ Allow members several minutes to complete their own notes.

Then begin with:

“What did you notice?”

Not:

“Did you like them?”

Not:

“What score would you give them?”

Not even:

“What did you think?”

Begin with observation, not evaluation.

Use **FM 2.4 — Candidate Conversation Notes** to guide the discussion.

Leader's Note

An interview has gone well when everyone stops noticing that it is an interview.

There will be structure, questions, and someone watching the time.

But underneath all of that, two parties are beginning to wonder about one another:

Who are you?

Who are we?

What has God been doing in our stories?

Could those stories be leading us toward a shared ministry?

You do not need to answer that in the first interview. You need enough honest conversation to discover whether you want to talk again.

FM 3.3

Interview Responsibilities Checklist

Purpose

A conversational interview should feel natural to the candidate. That does not mean it is unplanned.

Someone needs to welcome the candidate, watch the time, protect space for candidate questions, explain next steps, and follow up afterward.

When these responsibilities are clear beforehand, committee members are freer to do the most important thing during the interview: listen.

Use this checklist before each interview. One person may carry more than one responsibility, particularly on a small committee.

Before the Interview

Primary Host

Assigned to: _____

The Primary Host helps create continuity from beginning to end.

☐ Welcome the candidate.

☐ Make introductions.

☐ Explain the general flow of the conversation.

☐ Help create a relaxed, hospitable atmosphere.

☐ Make transitions when necessary.

☐ Invite the candidate's questions.

☐ Bring the interview to a gracious close.

The Primary Host facilitates the conversation without dominating it.

Prayer Leader

Assigned to: _____

☐ Prepare a brief opening prayer.

☐ Pray for the candidate rather than merely for the committee's search.

☐ Keep the prayer simple and welcoming.

☐ Lead the closing prayer if one is planned.

See **FM 1.4 — Prayer Practices for Discernment**.

Timekeeper

Assigned to: _____

The Timekeeper protects the shape of the conversation without letting the clock control it.

☐ Know the agreed interview length.

☐ Know when the conversation should turn toward candidate questions.

☐ Give the Primary Host a discreet signal when that time approaches.

☐ Watch for one area consuming disproportionate time.

☐ Help ensure the interview ends when promised.

Candidate questions should begin by:

Interview should conclude by:

The Timekeeper's most important responsibility is not ensuring that every committee question gets asked, but protecting the candidate's time to ask questions.

Conversation Leaders

Before the interview, identify who will **begin** each planned area of conversation.

Do not assign individual questions.

Area of Conversation	Person Who Will Begin
Candidate's story	☐
☐	☐
☐	☐
☐	☐
☐	☐

The person listed begins that part of the conversation. After that, everyone listens.

Other committee members may ask natural follow-up questions as the conversation develops.

Primary Note Keeper

Assigned to: ☐

Everyone may make brief notes, but one person should keep a fuller record so others do not spend the interview writing.

☐ Record significant stories.

☐ Note important themes or patterns.

☐ Record questions the committee may want to revisit.

☐ Record questions the candidate asks.

☐ Note information the committee promises to provide later.

☐ Avoid attempting to transcribe the conversation.

☐ Avoid evaluative labels.

Use **FM 2.4 — Candidate Conversation Notes** as appropriate.

Technology Host — Online Interviews

Assigned to: ☐

For Zoom or another online platform:

☐ Create the meeting link.

☐ Send it to the candidate in advance.

☐ Open the meeting early.

☐ Confirm microphone and camera function.

☐ Admit the candidate when everyone is ready.

☐ Know how to respond to basic connection problems.

☐ Have the candidate's phone number available in case the connection fails.

☐ Confirm that recording is turned off unless recording has been explicitly agreed upon and is permitted by your process.

See **FM 3.4 — Zoom Interview Checklist**.

Hospitality Host — In-Person Interviews

Assigned to: _____

☐ Know where the candidate will arrive.

☐ Greet the candidate personally.

☐ Provide clear parking and entrance information beforehand.

☐ Make sure the meeting space is comfortable and private.

☐ Provide water or refreshments.

☐ Introduce unfamiliar people.

☐ Attend to accessibility needs.

☐ Help the candidate know what happens next.

Hospitality begins before the first question.

Candidate Questions

Person who will make the transition:

At the agreed time, this person might say:

“We want to make sure you have plenty of time to interview us as well. What would you like to know?”

During this portion:

☐ Listen carefully to the candidate's questions.

☐ Allow the committee member best able to answer to respond.

☐ Avoid everyone answering the same question.

☐ Answer honestly.

☐ Record questions requiring additional information.

☐ Avoid turning every answer into an advertisement for the congregation.

Information we promised to provide afterward:

_____

_____

_____

Closing the Interview

Assigned to: _____

Before ending:

☐ Ask whether the candidate has anything else they would like to share.

☐ Ask whether the candidate has any remaining questions.

☐ Explain what happens next.

☐ Give a realistic communication timeline.

☐ Identify who will contact the candidate.

☐ Thank the candidate.

☐ Close with prayer if appropriate.

Candidate Follow-Up

Assigned to: _____

After the interview:

☐ Send any information promised during the conversation.

☐ Thank the candidate for the interview.

☐ Answer outstanding questions.

☐ Communicate the committee's decision within the promised timeframe.

☐ If the process is delayed, tell the candidate rather than allowing the promised date to pass silently.

Committee Reflection

Person facilitating: _____

Immediately after the interview—or when the committee has agreed to reconvene:

☐ Allow a moment of silence.

☐ Pray.

☐ Give members time to complete individual notes.

☐ Begin with **"What did you notice?"**

☐ Invite every committee member to speak.

☐ Identify emerging patterns.

☐ Record questions that remain.

☐ Determine the next step when appropriate.

☐ Identify who will communicate that next step to the candidate.

Before Everyone Leaves

Confirm:

What did we promise the candidate?

Who will provide it?

What is our next step?

Who is responsible?

By when?

When will the candidate hear from us?

Who will contact them?

Five-Minute Final Check

Immediately before the candidate joins you, ask:

☐ Who welcomes?

☐ Who prays?

☐ Who watches the time?

☐ Who keeps notes?

☐ Who begins each major conversation?

☐ Who makes the turn to candidate questions?

☐ Who closes?

☐ Who follows up afterward?

Then put the checklist aside and attend to the candidate.

Leader's Note

Assign **responsibilities**, not a sequence of questions.

There is a significant difference between:

"Mary asks questions 1–3, John asks 4–6, and Susan asks 7–9."

and:

"Mary will begin our conversation about leadership. The rest of us will listen and follow the conversation."

The first produces a panel interview; the second can become a conversation.

Preparation should make the committee less visible, not more. When everyone knows their responsibility, no one has to manage the interview while trying to listen.

Prepare the roles. Then attend to the person.

FM 3.4

Zoom Interview Checklist

Purpose

Online interviews are now a normal part of pastoral searches, allowing committees and candidates to begin conversations without the expense and disruption of travel.

They also create challenges that do not arise in the same way when people share a room.

Technology can interrupt conversation. A screen full of faces can feel like a panel examination. People may talk over one another, and committee members taking notes may appear distracted.

Good preparation helps the technology recede into the background so people can attend to one another.

Use this checklist before each online interview.

Several Days Before the Interview

Confirm the Details

☐ Confirm the date.

☐ Confirm the time and time zone.

☐ Confirm the anticipated length of the interview.

☐ Send the meeting link.

☐ Tell the candidate who will participate.

☐ Provide the name and contact information of the committee's primary contact.

☐ Provide a telephone number to use if the connection fails.

☐ Tell the candidate generally what to expect from the conversation.

Interview date:

Time:

Candidate's time zone:

Interview length:

Primary contact:

Backup telephone number:

Prepare the Technology

Technology Host

Assigned to:

The Technology Host should:

☐ Create the meeting.

☐ Use a meeting password or waiting room when appropriate.

☐ Confirm the meeting link works.

☐ Know how to admit participants.

☐ Know how to mute and unmute participants.

☐ Know how to respond to common audio problems.

☐ Know how to reconnect if the meeting is interrupted.

☐ Make certain recording is turned off unless recording has been explicitly agreed upon and is permitted by your process.

Important

Do not record an interview simply because the platform makes it easy.

A pastoral interview is confidential.

If there is a legitimate reason to record one, obtain the candidate's explicit agreement beforehand and follow applicable denominational policies and requirements.

Committee Members: Check Your Setup

Before interview day, each committee member should check:

Camera

☐ Camera works.

☐ Camera is approximately at eye level.

☐ Face is clearly visible.

☐ Light is in front of you rather than behind you.

☐ Background is reasonably uncluttered.

☐ Camera framing shows your face and upper body comfortably.

Sound

☐ Microphone works.

☐ Speakers or headphones work.

☐ Room is quiet.

☐ Television, radio, and other background sound are off.

☐ Phone notifications are silenced.

Internet

☐ Internet connection is reliable.

☐ Unnecessary applications are closed.

☐ A backup plan is available if the connection fails.

Choose the Right Place

Join from a place where you can give the candidate your full attention.

Avoid participating from:

☐ A moving vehicle.

☐ A restaurant or coffee shop.

☐ A public space.

☐ A room where other people can overhear.

☐ A location where you expect frequent interruptions.

☐ Anywhere confidential conversation cannot be protected.

If several committee members are participating from the same room, test the setup beforehand.

One laptop placed at the end of a long table may allow the committee to see the candidate clearly while leaving the candidate staring at several distant faces they can barely hear.

Make sure the candidate can see and hear everyone comfortably.

Fifteen Minutes Before the Interview

Committee members should join early.

☐ Confirm everyone's audio.

☐ Confirm everyone's video.

☐ Check names displayed on screen.

☐ Confirm who is absent, if anyone.

☐ Review interview responsibilities.

☐ Confirm who will welcome the candidate.

☐ Confirm who is keeping time.

☐ Confirm who is taking primary notes.

☐ Confirm who will make the transition to candidate questions.

☐ Confirm when candidate questions should begin.

☐ Have the candidate's telephone number available.

Then pray. Do not spend the final minutes adding questions.

When the Candidate Joins

The Technology Host should admit the candidate only when the committee is ready.

Welcome the candidate before attending to the technology.

Do not begin with:

“Can you hear us?”

unless there actually appears to be a problem.

Begin with hospitality.

Then, if needed, confirm:

“Can you see and hear everyone comfortably?”

Give the candidate a moment to settle.

Introductions

Online meetings make names harder to remember.

During introductions:

☐ Say your name clearly.

☐ Keep introductions brief.

☐ Consider including first names in screen names.

☐ Avoid everyone giving lengthy biographies.

If your committee is large, the Primary Host might remind the candidate:

“Please don't worry about remembering everyone's name immediately.”

During the Interview

Look at the Candidate

When possible, look toward the camera when speaking.

When listening, it is natural to look at the candidate's image on the screen.

The goal is not perfect eye contact, but visible attentiveness.

Stay Visibly Present

☐ Keep your camera on unless circumstances require otherwise.

☐ Avoid checking email.

☐ Avoid reading text messages.

☐ Do not browse other documents unnecessarily.

☐ Avoid eating during the interview.

☐ Do not carry on side conversations.

☐ Do not leave the screen without explanation.

Remember that small distractions are unusually visible online.

Taking Notes

Looking down repeatedly can make it appear that you are distracted.

If you are taking notes, tell the candidate.

For example:

“You may see some of us looking down occasionally. We're making a few notes so we can remember the conversation.”

Then return your attention to the candidate.

The Primary Note Keeper should carry most of the responsibility for detailed notes so everyone else can listen.

Avoid Talking Over One Another

Online conversations have fewer natural cues for knowing when someone is about to speak.

Committee members should:

☐ Allow a brief pause after the candidate finishes.

☐ Avoid jumping immediately into every silence.

☐ Let the person assigned to begin a topic begin it.

☐ Allow natural follow-up questions.

☐ Yield when two people begin speaking at once.

A simple:

“Go ahead, Susan.”

is enough.

Do not become so uncomfortable with silence that every pause gets filled.

Silence can still be part of discernment—even on Zoom.

Avoid the Panel Effect

A screen filled with committee members can already feel intimidating. Do not intensify that by conducting a rapid sequence of questions.

Avoid:

Committee Member 1: Question.

Candidate: Answer.

Committee Member 2: Next question.

Candidate: Answer.

Committee Member 3: Next question.

Instead, allow one answer to become a conversation. Listen. Respond. Ask follow-up questions. Let people laugh and stories breathe.

The technology may create a grid; your conversation does not have to behave like one.

When Technology Fails

Something eventually will go wrong.

Someone freezes.

Audio disappears.

The candidate drops out.

A committee member loses their connection.

Do not let a minor technical problem create unnecessary anxiety.

If one committee member loses connection:

☐ Pause briefly.

☐ Determine whether they can reconnect.

☐ Continue if appropriate.

If the candidate loses connection:

☐ Wait several minutes for reconnection.

☐ Technology Host contacts the candidate if necessary.

☐ Use the backup telephone number.

If the problem cannot be resolved:

Reschedule.

Do not conduct an important pastoral interview through poor audio, repeated interruptions, or a connection that prevents genuine conversation.

A technical problem tells you nothing about a candidate's suitability for ministry.

Protect Candidate Question Time

Online interviews can consume time quickly, so protect the turn to candidate questions.

The Timekeeper should give the Primary Host a discreet signal when it is time to turn the conversation.

Then say:

“We want to make sure you have plenty of time to ask questions of us.”

Protect at least **15–20 minutes** when possible.

See **FM 3.2 — Suggested Interview Flow**.

Closing the Meeting

Before ending:

☐ Ask whether the candidate has any additional questions.

☐ Ask whether there is anything they hoped you would ask.

☐ Explain next steps.

☐ Tell the candidate when they should expect to hear from you.

☐ Thank them.

☐ Close with prayer if appropriate.

Allow the candidate to leave before the committee begins its discussion.

After the Candidate Leaves

Confirm that the candidate is no longer connected to the meeting.

Then:

☐ Pause.

☐ Pray.

☐ Allow several minutes for individual notes.

☐ Begin with **“What did you notice?”**

Use **FM 2.4 — Candidate Conversation Notes**.

If the committee remains online for its discussion, continue to protect confidentiality.

Final Two-Minute Checklist

Immediately before admitting the candidate:

☐ Audio works.

☐ Cameras work.

☐ Lighting is adequate.

☐ Backgrounds are appropriate.

☐ Phones are silenced.

☐ Doors are closed.

☐ Recording is off.

☐ Candidate telephone number is available.

☐ Everyone knows their responsibility.

☐ Candidate question time is protected.

☐ We are ready to listen.

Leader's Note

The best Zoom interview is one in which everyone eventually forgets the technology.

Technology should make the conversation possible, not become the conversation.

Prepare carefully enough that when the candidate appears, your attention can move away from cameras, microphones, schedules, and checklists.

There is a person on the other side of the screen. Receive them as though they had just walked through your door.

FM 3.5

Candidate Communication Timeline

Purpose

Candidates should not have to wonder what is happening.

Pastoral searches inevitably include periods of waiting. Committees need time to meet, compare calendars, conduct interviews, check references, consult denominational leaders, and pray.

Waiting is understandable.

Silence is harder.

Good communication conveys respect and gives candidates the information they need for their own discernment, particularly when they may be in conversation with more than one congregation.

Use this guide to establish your communication practices before interviews begin.

---

1. Establish One Primary Contact

Candidates should know who speaks for the committee.

Our primary candidate contact is:

Name:

Email: _____

Telephone: _____

Backup contact:

Name: _____

Email: _____

Telephone: _____

Whenever possible, routine communication should come through one person.

This prevents:

- contradictory information
- duplicated messages
- missed communications
- uncertainty about whom the candidate should contact

Other committee members may naturally communicate with candidates as relationships develop, but significant information about the search should be coordinated through the primary contact.

---

2. Set Your Communication Standard

Before candidates enter the process, agree upon reasonable expectations.

We will acknowledge candidate communications within:

☐ 24 hours

☐ 48 hours

☐ Other: _____

After an interview, we will communicate with the candidate within:

☐ 2–3 days

☐ One week

☐ Other: _____

If we cannot make a decision by the date we promised:

We will contact the candidate before that date passes.

That last commitment may be the most important one on this page. You do not need a decision in order to communicate.

---

3. Initial Contact

When inviting a candidate into conversation, provide enough information to make the invitation clear.

Include:

☐ Who you are.

☐ The congregation you represent.

☐ Why you are contacting them.

☐ The stage of your search.

☐ The kind of conversation you are proposing.

☐ Several possible dates and times.

☐ The anticipated length of the interview.

☐ Whether the meeting will be online or in person.

☐ Who will participate.

☐ Your contact information.

☐ An invitation for questions.

Date initial contact made:

Candidate responded:

Interview scheduled for:

4. Interview Confirmation

Once an interview is scheduled, send a confirmation.

Include:

☐ Date.

☐ Time.

☐ Time zone.

☐ Zoom link or meeting location.

☐ Approximate length.

☐ Names of participants.

☐ Primary contact information.

☐ Backup telephone number for online interviews.

☐ Any materials the candidate should review beforehand.

☐ General description of what to expect.

Confirmation sent:

Person responsible:

Do not send the candidate a long list of interview questions unless your process intentionally calls for doing so.

The candidate should prepare for a conversation, not study for an examination.

---

5. After the First Interview

Before ending the interview, tell the candidate what happens next. Be specific enough to be useful.

Instead of:

“We'll be in touch.”

say:

“Our committee meets again Tuesday evening. We expect to contact you by Thursday.”

Or:

“We have two additional first conversations scheduled over the next ten days. We will update you by August 20, even if we have not made a decision by then.”

We told the candidate we would communicate by:

Person responsible:

Follow-up communication sent:

---

6. When the Conversation Will Continue

If the committee wants another conversation, communicate that clearly.

Include:

☐ Appreciation for the previous conversation.

☐ Your desire to continue.

☐ The purpose of the next conversation.

☐ Possible dates.

☐ Anticipated length.

☐ Who will participate.

☐ Any preparation requested of the candidate.

Next conversation:

Confirmation sent:

Next update promised by:

---

7. During Longer Periods of Discernment

Sometimes nothing significant has changed.

Communicate anyway.

A brief message can say:

"We wanted to keep the commitment we made to stay in touch. Our committee continues to discern and expects to meet again next week. We do not have a decision to share yet, but we wanted you to know that our conversation with you continues."

You do not need to manufacture news; you need to maintain the relationship.

Our practice during extended discernment will be to update active candidates every:

---

8. When the Timeline Changes

Search timelines change frequently.

When they do:

☐ Tell the candidate promptly.

☐ Explain the change when appropriate.

☐ Give a new realistic timeframe.

☐ Avoid promising a date you are unlikely to meet.

What changed?

Who needs to know?

New anticipated date:

Communication sent:

A delay usually causes less frustration than a promised date passing without communication.

---

9. When the Committee Needs More Information

If additional information is needed, ask directly.

Do not leave the candidate guessing why the process has slowed.

The committee may need:

☐ Clarification about something in the profile.

☐ Another conversation.

☐ Additional reference information.

☐ A sermon or other ministry material.

☐ Information required by the denomination.

☐ Discussion of practical matters.

☐ Other: _____

What do we need?

Why do we need it?

Who will ask?

By when?

Ask only for information relevant to discernment and consistent with your denomination's process.

---

10. When the Candidate Is No Longer Under Consideration

Communicate promptly.

The appropriate form of communication depends on how far the relationship has developed.

Before an interview

A brief personal email or letter may be sufficient.

After one or more interviews

A more personal communication is appropriate.

After significant conversations or an interview weekend

Whenever possible, communicate personally by telephone or video conversation before sending written confirmation.

The deeper the relationship, the more personal the ending should be.

Do not make candidates infer that the conversation has ended because the committee stopped communicating.

---

11. When a Candidate Withdraws

Respond graciously.

Thank them for:

- the conversations you shared
- the time they invested
- the stories they entrusted to you
- their honesty in discernment

If appropriate, ask whether they are willing to share anything about what led to their decision.

Do not argue.

Do not try immediately to change their mind.

Their discernment deserves the same respect you expect for yours.

---

12. When You Are Approaching Final Discernment

Communication becomes especially important as the relationship deepens.

Make sure the candidate understands:

☐ Where they are in the process.

☐ What steps remain.

☐ Whether references will be contacted.

☐ Whether additional denominational approvals are required.

☐ What an interview weekend will involve.

☐ When their identity may be shared and with whom.

☐ What decisions the congregation must make.

☐ The anticipated timeline.

Never assume experienced pastors understand your denomination's call process. Explain it.

Candidate Communication Record

Use this simple record for each active candidate.

Candidate: ☐

Date	Communication	From/To	Next Step or Promise
☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐

Next communication promised by:

Person responsible:

Before Sending Any Candidate Communication

Ask:

☐ Is it clear?

☐ Is it accurate?

☐ Is it warm without making promises we cannot keep?

☐ Does it tell the candidate what happens next?

☐ Does it give a realistic timeframe?

☐ Does it protect confidentiality?

☐ Does the candidate know whom to contact with questions?

Leader's Note

Candidates are evaluating your congregation's communication long before anyone discusses communication styles in an interview.

They notice whether messages are answered.

They notice whether appointments are confirmed.

They notice whether promised dates are honored.

They notice whether delays are explained.

They notice whether difficult news is communicated personally and respectfully.

Those experiences tell candidates something about the congregation they may one day serve.

A useful rule for the entire search is simple:

Never make a candidate ask, "Have they forgotten about me?"

When you know something, communicate it. When you do not yet know, communicate that too.

FM 3.6

First Interview Reflection Worksheet

Purpose

The first interview is over.

Before deciding what the conversation means, remember what actually happened.

Enthusiasm can move a committee too quickly toward a candidate; disappointment can move it too quickly away. A familiar personality may feel immediately comfortable, while an unfamiliar one may require more time. One memorable answer can overshadow an otherwise rich conversation.

Reflection creates needed space between experience and conclusion.

Complete Part One individually before discussing the interview as a committee; then use Part Two to reflect together.

The question at this stage remains deliberately limited:

Is there enough here for another conversation?

Part One — Individual Reflection

Candidate:

Interview date:

Committee member:

Before completing this worksheet, take a few moments in silence. Do not consult other committee members. Begin with your own observations.

---

1. What Stayed With Me?

Without looking at your notes, what do you remember most clearly?

A story I remember:

Something the candidate said that stayed with me:

A question the candidate asked that stayed with me:

A moment in the conversation I keep returning to:

Why do I think it stayed with me?

2. What Did I Notice?

Record observations before interpretations.

I noticed:

I noticed:

I noticed:

Now look at what you wrote.

Which are observations?

Which are already interpretations?

For example:

Observation:
The candidate asked several follow-up questions about the congregation's relationship with the neighborhood.

Interpretation:
The candidate is strongly mission-minded.

The interpretation may eventually prove accurate. For now, remain curious.

---

3. What Gave Me Energy?

What in the conversation gave you hope, interest, or energy?

What specifically caused that response?

What would you like to hear more about?

4. What Gave Me Pause?

Was there anything that caused concern, uncertainty, or hesitation?

What specifically caused that response?

Now ask:

Do I understand enough to know what it means?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I am uncertain

If not, what question might help?

A concern that deserves exploration may be a reason for another conversation rather than a reason to end one.

---

5. What Surprised Me?

Something I did not expect:

Something that challenged an assumption I had made from the candidate's profile:

Something that caused me to see the candidate differently:

Something that caused me to see our congregation differently:

---

6. What Did I Hear About Formation?

What experiences appear to have shaped this pastor?

Where did I hear evidence of learning?

Did the candidate describe a mistake, disappointment, struggle, or change of mind?

What did they seem to learn from it?

What would I like to understand more deeply?

7. What Did I Hear About Leadership?

Based upon stories the candidate actually told, what did you notice about how they:

Listen?

Work with others?

Make decisions?

Respond when things do not go as planned?

Navigate differences?

Encourage the gifts of other people?

Approach change?

Do not complete areas the interview did not explore. An empty space may simply identify something for a future conversation.

---

8. What Did the Candidate's Questions Reveal?

Which questions seemed especially important to the candidate?

What might those questions suggest about what the candidate is discerning?

Did any question reveal an issue we need to think about more carefully as a congregation?

Did we give an answer that was incomplete or deserves further conversation?

---

9. Check My Own Response

Complete these sentences as honestly as possible.

I found myself especially drawn to:

I found myself reacting negatively to:

The candidate reminded me of:

One preference or assumption I may be bringing into my response is:

Something about this candidate that feels familiar to me:

Something that feels unfamiliar:

Now ask:

What belongs to the candidate, and what belongs to me?

---

10. What Do I Still Want to Know?

If you could have another hour with this candidate, what would you want to talk about?

I would like to hear more about:

I would like to understand:

I would like to return to:

A new question that emerged for me is:

---

11. My Present Discernment

Do not ask, “Is this our next pastor?” Ask, “Would another conversation help us discern further?”

At this moment:

☐ I would like the conversation to continue.

☐ I would like the conversation to continue, but there are important questions I want us to explore.

☐ I am uncertain and would benefit from further conversation.

☐ I believe we may have enough information to conclude the conversation.

What leads me to this response?

Part Two — Committee Reflection

After everyone has completed the individual reflection, gather again and begin with prayer or a brief period of silence.

Then ask each committee member to respond to the same opening question:

What did you notice?

Allow everyone to speak before open discussion begins.

---

12. What Did We Notice Together?

Record observations that appeared in several members' reflections.

What stories did several of us remember?

What themes appeared repeatedly?

What surprised several of us?

13. Where Did We See Things Differently?

Do not treat different perceptions as a problem to eliminate. They may help the committee see more clearly.

Something we interpreted differently:

What did each person notice that led to the different interpretations?

Do we need more information?

Could another conversation help?

14. Compare the Conversation With the Profile

Return briefly to **FM 2.2 — Reading for Patterns**.

A pattern from the profile that became clearer:

A pattern that now seems less certain:

Something new that emerged:

Something we expected to hear about but did not:

Is that absence significant?

Or have we simply not asked yet?

15. What Are We Learning About Possible Partnership?

Do not ask whether the candidate possesses every gift your congregation wants. Ask what you are beginning to recognize between the two stories.

Where did we hear connections between this candidate's vocation and our congregation's emerging ministry?

What gifts seem particularly relevant to the ministry ahead?

Where might the candidate challenge or stretch us?

Where might our congregation challenge or stretch the candidate?

What possibilities for shared ministry made us curious?

16. What Questions Should Continue?

Choose only the questions important enough to carry forward.

Question or conversation:

Why it matters:

Question or conversation:

Why it matters:

Question or conversation:

Why it matters:

These become starting points for the next conversation, not an interrogation list.

---

17. What Do We Owe the Candidate?

Before making a decision, ask whether the candidate needs anything from you.

☐ An answer to a question.

☐ Information we promised.

☐ Clarification about the congregation.

☐ Additional documents.

☐ Information about the search timeline.

☐ A clearer description of next steps.

☐ Nothing at this time.

What do we need to provide?

Who will provide it?

By when?

---

18. Discern the Next Step

After everyone has spoken and remaining questions have been identified:

☐ **Continue.** We would like another conversation.

☐ **Continue with particular questions.** There is enough possibility to continue, but several matters deserve deeper exploration.

☐ **Wait.** We need additional prayer, information, or reflection before deciding.

☐ **Conclude.** We have enough information to recognize that this conversation should not continue.

What leads us to this decision?

What happens next?

Who is responsible?

When will the candidate hear from us?

Before You Leave

Complete this sentence together:

At this point in the journey, what we most want to understand is…

Keep that question.

It may be more useful in the next interview than another list of prepared questions.

Leader's Note

The first interview does not need to produce certainty. A good first interview often produces something more useful: better questions.

You may leave knowing more about the candidate while also becoming more aware of what you do not know. You may discover that an initial concern deserves context. You may find that

something attractive in the profile matters less after conversation—or that something you barely noticed matters much more.

That is not indecision. It is discernment becoming deeper.

At this stage, determine only whether there is enough possibility, curiosity, and emerging connection to warrant another conversation. If there is, keep talking.

Chapter Four — Asking Better Questions

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 4.1

Building Story Questions

Purpose

Some interview questions invite information. Story questions invite experience.

There is a significant difference between asking:

“How do you lead change?”

and asking:

“Tell us about a time when you helped a congregation navigate an important change.”

The first invites the candidate to describe what they believe about leadership; the second asks them to remember what they actually did.

Stories reveal people, choices, relationships, surprises, mistakes, learning, and formation. They also give you something important to become curious about.

This worksheet helps you build story questions from what your congregation genuinely needs to explore.

---

1. Begin With What You Want to Understand

Do not begin by trying to write a good question. Begin with curiosity.

We want to understand how this candidate:

For example:

- works with people who disagree
- develops other leaders
- responds when plans fail
- engages the surrounding community
- approaches pastoral care
- leads change
- collaborates with staff
- understands worship
- learns from mistakes

Now ask:

What kind of experience might reveal this?

That experience is where the story question begins.

2. Use the Basic Story Invitation

A simple story question often begins:

Tell us about a time when…

Complete the sentence.

Tell us about a time when you…

Or:

Tell us the story of…

That may be enough. Do not add five questions. Ask, then listen.

3. Move From Abstraction to Experience

Practice turning abstract questions into story questions.

Instead of:

What is your leadership style?

Ask:

Tell us about a time when your leadership made a difference in the life of a congregation. What was happening?

Instead of:

How do you deal with conflict?

Ask:

Tell us about a time when people you were serving saw an important issue very differently. How did you enter that situation?

Instead of:

How do you empower lay leaders?

Ask:

Tell us about someone whose gifts for ministry you helped discover or develop.

Instead of:

Are you comfortable with change?

Ask:

Tell us about a significant change you helped a congregation navigate.

Instead of:

What is your approach to mission?

Ask:

Tell us about a ministry beyond the congregation that has been especially meaningful to you. How did it begin?

Instead of:

How do you handle failure?

Ask:

Tell us about something in ministry that did not work the way you hoped.

Instead of:

Are you collaborative?

Ask:

Tell us about something important you accomplished in ministry that you could not have accomplished alone.

Notice what these questions do: they do not tell candidates what the committee hopes to hear. They create space for candidates to show how they have lived their ministry.

---

4. Build a Question From a Congregational Need

Begin with something your congregation has identified during its own discernment.

Our congregation needs a pastor who can help us:

Resist turning that statement directly into a question.

For example:

Need:
We need someone who can help us become more engaged with our community.

Weak question:
How would you help us become more engaged with our community?

That question invites speculation. Instead, ask for experience:

Tell us about a time when you helped a congregation become more connected with its surrounding community. How did that relationship develop?

Now build your own.

Congregational need:

Experience that might help us understand this candidate:

Story question:

---

5. Build a Question From the Candidate's Profile

Some of the best story questions are specific to the candidate.

Something we noticed in the profile:

What makes us curious:

The story we would like to hear:

Our question:

For example:

Observation:
The candidate mentions creating a neighborhood tutoring program.

Curiosity:
How did the congregation become involved?

Question:

You mentioned the tutoring program in your profile. Tell us how that began.

Then listen. The next question will probably come from the answer.

---

6. Build Questions That Reveal Formation

A story becomes especially valuable when you discover how the experience shaped the person.

Begin with an experience:

Tell us about a difficult season in your ministry.

Then listen.

Afterward, you might ask:

What did that experience teach you?

What did you discover about yourself?

Did it change the way you lead?

Who helped you through it?

What do you understand now that you did not understand then?

How does that experience continue to shape your ministry?

These questions move the conversation from "What happened?" to "Who are you becoming because it happened?"

---

7. Build Questions About Success Differently

Successful ministry stories can reveal important gifts, but they can also become rehearsed accomplishment stories.

Instead of asking:

"What is your greatest accomplishment in ministry?"

consider:

Tell us about something in ministry that you are deeply grateful to have been part of.

Then ask:

Who else made it possible?

What was your part?

What did others contribute?

What surprised you?

What did you learn?

Listen not only for what was accomplished, but for how the candidate understands their place in the story.

---

8. Build Questions About Difficulty Without Creating a Trap

Difficult experiences deserve conversation, but a question should not be designed to catch a candidate making a mistake.

Instead of:

“Tell us about your biggest failure.”

consider:

Tell us about something in ministry that did not go the way you expected.

Or:

Tell us about a decision you would make differently today.

Or:

Tell us about an experience that changed the way you understand pastoral leadership.

Then ask:

What happened?

When did you realize something needed to change?

What did you do next?

What did you learn?

How has that learning affected your ministry since then?

You are not looking for a pastor who has never failed. You are listening for what happens when they do.

---

9. Build Questions About Differences

Questions about conflict often invite stories about difficult people. Ask instead about relationships and differences.

For example:

Tell us about a time when you and someone you respected saw an important issue differently.

Then listen.

Possible follow-ups:

What helped you understand their perspective?

What did you hope they understood about yours?

How did the relationship change?

Was the disagreement resolved?

Did it need to be?

What did you learn about yourself?

These questions may tell you much more about pastoral leadership than asking whether someone is "good at conflict management."

---

10. Build Questions About Change

Avoid asking candidates whether they like change.

Almost everyone knows the expected answer.

Instead ask:

Tell us about a change you believed was important but others were not yet ready to make.

Or:

Tell us about a change you initially supported but later reconsidered.

Or:

Tell us about a time when a congregation changed more slowly than you hoped.

Then become curious about the story.

What did you notice?

How did you respond?

What did you learn about the congregation?

What did you learn about yourself?

What happened eventually?

---

11. Build Questions About Mission

Avoid:

“Are you mission-minded?”

or:

“How would you grow our church?”

Instead explore how the candidate understands the relationship between congregation and community.

For example:

Tell us about a time when something happening in the community changed what a congregation did.

Or:

Tell us about a relationship beyond the church that changed the way you understood the church's mission.

Or:

Tell us about a time when a congregation discovered a gift it could offer its community.

Listen for how the candidate notices, listens, imagines, partners, and leads.

---

12. Build Questions About Pastoral Care

Instead of:

“What is your philosophy of pastoral care?”

ask:

Without identifying anyone, tell us about a pastoral relationship that taught you something important about caring for people.

Or:

Tell us about a time when you realized that what someone needed from you was different from what you initially thought they needed.

Then ask:

What helped you recognize that?

How did you respond?

What did you learn?

Be careful not to invite candidates to violate another person's confidentiality in answering.

---

13. Build Questions About Collaboration

Instead of:

"Are you a team player?"

ask:

Tell us about a ministry that became better because someone else challenged or changed your original idea.

Or:

Tell us about a time when someone else had the better idea.

Or:

Tell us about a ministry in which your most important contribution was helping other people lead.

Listen for how the candidate speaks about the gifts, contributions, and authority of others.

---

14. Test the Question

Before adding a question to your interview plan, ask:

☐ Does it invite a story?

☐ Does it ask about actual experience rather than hypothetical behavior?

☐ Does it avoid revealing the answer we hope to hear?

☐ Is it open enough to allow an unexpected answer?

☐ Does it explore something relevant to our congregation's discernment?

☐ Can the candidate reasonably answer without violating someone else's confidentiality?

☐ Are we genuinely curious about the answer?

☐ Are we prepared to follow the story rather than immediately ask the next question?

If not, revise the question.

---

15. Build Our Story Questions

Use this page when preparing for an interview.

What we want to understand:

What kind of experience might reveal it?

Our story question:

Possible follow-up:

What we want to understand:

What kind of experience might reveal it?

Our story question:

Possible follow-up:

What we want to understand:

What kind of experience might reveal it?

Our story question:

Possible follow-up:

What we want to understand:

What kind of experience might reveal it?

Our story question:

Possible follow-up:

One Final Test

Read your planned questions aloud.

Then ask: Could an intelligent candidate figure out what answer we want? If so, rewrite the question. Could this question lead somewhere we did not expect? If so, you probably have a conversation worth having.

Leader's Note

Story questions are powerful because ministry happens in stories.

People resist.

Plans change.

Relationships deepen.

Ideas fail.

Someone notices something.

Another person sees it differently.

A pastor learns.

A congregation changes.

God becomes visible somewhere no one expected.

A candidate can tell you what they believe about leadership, collaboration, mission, pastoral care, or change. Those answers matter.

But then ask:

“Can you tell us about a time when that happened?”

The story will often reveal something the principle could not.

When the story becomes interesting, resist looking down at your list for the next question. Stay with the story.

FM 4.2

Follow-Up Question Guide

Purpose

The most revealing question in an interview is often not the one you prepared, but the one that comes next.

A candidate tells a story. Something catches your attention: a phrase you want to understand, a missing part of the story, a moment of learning, surprise, resistance, disappointment, or change. That is the moment to stay with the conversation.

Follow-up questions communicate:

We heard you.

We are interested.

Tell us more.

This guide helps you recognize those openings and respond with curiosity rather than moving immediately to the next prepared question.

---

1. The Simplest Follow-Up

Often the best follow-up question is:

Tell us more about that.

You do not always need a more elaborate question.

Other simple invitations include:

What happened next?

What do you mean by that?

Can you give us an example?

What was that like for you?

What made that important?

Say a little more about what you learned.

Simple questions keep the story moving.

---

2. Follow the Candidate's Words

Listen for words or phrases that seem to carry weight.

Suppose a candidate says:

"Eventually I realized we were solving the wrong problem."

Do not rush to your next question.

Ask:

"What helped you realize that?"

If the candidate says:

"That experience changed the way I lead."

Ask:

"What changed?"

If the candidate says:

"There was considerable resistance."

Ask:

"What did you come to understand about the resistance?"

The candidate has already shown you where the next question is. Follow them there.

---

3. Listen for Open Doors

Certain phrases frequently signal that there is more to the story.

“I learned…”

Ask:

What did you learn?

How did you learn it?

How has that changed your ministry?

“I realized…”

Ask:

What led to that realization?

Was there a particular moment when you saw things differently?

“We struggled…”

Ask:

What made it difficult?

How did you respond?

What did you learn from that struggle?

“I was surprised…”

Ask:

What surprised you?

Why do you think you had not expected it?

“People resisted…”

Ask:

What were they concerned about?

How did you come to understand their concerns?

Did anything about their response change your thinking?

“It didn't work…”

Ask:

When did you begin to recognize that?

What did you do next?

What would you do differently now?

“We decided…”

Ask:

Who was involved in the decision?

How was the decision made?

Were there people who saw it differently?

“We changed…”

Ask:

What made change possible?

Who helped lead it?

What did you learn along the way?

"Looking back…"

Ask:

What do you see now that you couldn't see then?

---

4. Follow the People in the Story

Pastoral stories involve other people. Listen for them.

A candidate says:

"We decided to begin a new community ministry."

Ask:

Who is "we"?

Then:

How did those people become involved?

Whose idea was it?

Who saw things differently?

Who emerged as a leader?

Whose voice changed the direction?

Who was missing from the conversation?

These questions help you understand how the candidate relates to others without ever asking:

"Are you collaborative?"

---

5. Follow the Decision

When a candidate describes making an important decision, become curious about the process.

Ask:

What were you considering?

What alternatives did you see?

Who helped you think it through?

Who participated in the decision?

What made you choose that direction?

What happened afterward?

Knowing what you know now, would you make the same decision?

You are listening not merely for whether the decision succeeded, but for how the candidate makes decisions.

---

6. Follow the Difficulty

When something difficult appears in the story, do not immediately move away from it.

You might ask:

What made that difficult for you?

How did you respond initially?

Did your response change over time?

Who helped you?

What did you misunderstand at first?

What did you learn about the congregation?

What did you learn about yourself?

How did the experience affect the relationships involved?

Do not turn difficulty into an interrogation. Remain curious about formation.

---

7. Follow the Success

Success deserves follow-up questions too.

When a candidate tells an impressive story, ask:

How did that begin?

Who else made it possible?

What was your particular contribution?

What gifts did other people bring?

What surprised you about the outcome?

What happened after you stepped away?

That last question can be especially revealing.

Pastoral leadership is not only about what happens while the pastor is present. Its fruit may become clearest in what continues after the pastor is no longer leading it.

---

8. Follow the Learning

Listen carefully whenever candidates describe something they learned.

Then go deeper.

The candidate says:

“I learned to listen more carefully.”

You might ask:

“What happened that taught you that?”

Then:

“How would we see that learning reflected in the way you lead today?”

This helps distinguish a lesson someone can articulate from formation that has begun to change behavior.

---

9. Follow the Change

When a candidate describes changing their mind, theology, practice, or leadership approach, pay attention.

Ask:

What did you believe before?

What caused you to reconsider it?

Was changing difficult?

Who influenced you?

How has that change affected your ministry?

Changing one's mind is not necessarily inconsistency; it may be evidence of learning.

---

10. Follow the Emotion

Sometimes the content of a story matters less than the energy around it.

You may notice:

- excitement
- affection
- gratitude
- sadness
- frustration
- pride
- disappointment
- hesitation

Do not diagnose the emotion. Become curious.

You might say:

“You seem to have a lot of affection for that congregation. What made that experience so meaningful?”

Or:

“That sounds as though it was a difficult season. What made it particularly difficult?”

Stay with what the candidate has actually shown you; do not tell them what they are feeling.

---

11. Follow What Is Missing

Sometimes you hear a story and realize that something important has not been mentioned.

A candidate describes a major congregational change but never mentions the session, staff, or congregation.

Ask:

Who else was involved?

A candidate describes a serious disagreement but only describes what other people did.

Ask:

What was your part in what happened?

A candidate describes a successful ministry but not what became of it.

Ask:

What happened after the program was established?

A candidate describes a failure but not what was learned.

Ask:

How did that experience affect the way you approached ministry afterward?

Missing pieces invite curiosity; they are not proof that something is wrong.

---

12. Follow the Generalization

Candidates sometimes move from story into broad statements.

For example:

“I believe strongly in shared leadership.”

Ask:

“Can you tell us about a time when shared leadership worked especially well?”

Or:

“Churches need to be engaged in their communities.”

Ask:

“Tell us about a congregation where you saw that happen.”

Or:

“Communication is extremely important during change.”

Ask:

“Tell us about an experience that taught you that.”

When the conversation becomes abstract, invite experience.

---

13. Follow the Pronouns

Pronouns can create useful questions.

Listen for:

I

we

they

Do not count them or turn them into a personality test. Simply notice.

If a candidate repeatedly says:

“I created…”

“I decided…”

“I changed…”

you might naturally ask:

“Who else became involved in that work?”

If the candidate says:

“They weren't ready…”

ask:

“What helped you understand what they were experiencing?”

If the candidate says:

“We decided…”

ask:

“Tell us how that decision was made.”

The purpose is not to catch someone using the wrong pronoun, but to understand the relationships behind the language.

---

14. Follow the Candidate's Curiosity

Sometimes the candidate's answer becomes a question about your congregation.

Let it.

Candidate:

“That experience taught me how important it is to understand how decisions are really made in a congregation. How does that work here?”

You do not need to say, “We'll get to your questions later.” Answer.

The interview has become mutual conversation.

You can still protect a larger period for candidate questions later.

---

15. Know When Not to Follow Up

Not every answer needs a follow-up.

Sometimes the candidate has answered fully.

Sometimes a story has reached its natural ending.

Sometimes another committee member has something important to explore.

Sometimes the conversation needs to move on.

And sometimes silence is the best follow-up.

Allow a few seconds.

The candidate may continue.

Do not make the interview feel like every answer opens another trapdoor.

Follow-up questions should communicate interest rather than scrutiny.

---

16. Avoid the Cross-Examination

Follow-up questions become problematic when curiosity turns into proving a point.

Watch for sequences such as:

Why did you do that?

Didn't you realize that would happen?

Why didn't you talk to the session first?

Wouldn't it have been better to…?

The committee has stopped exploring the story and started arguing with it.

Instead ask:

What were you considering at the time?

What options did you see?

What did you learn afterward?

Would you approach it differently today?

Difficult questions need not make the conversation adversarial.

---

17. The Three-Level Follow-Up

When a story seems particularly important, listen at three levels.

Level One — What Happened?

What happened next?

Who was involved?

How did you respond?

Level Two — What Did It Mean?

What made that important?

What did you begin to understand differently?

What did you learn?

Level Three — How Were You Formed?

How did that experience change you?

How does it affect the way you minister now?

What would you do differently today?

You will not use all three levels for every story, but important stories often deserve more than one question.

18. Practice Following the Story

Candidate says:

"The program was initially my idea, but eventually one of our elders completely redesigned it."

What might you ask next?

Candidate says:

"Looking back, I think I moved much too quickly."

What might you ask next?

Candidate says:

"The congregation taught me more about pastoral care than seminary ever did."

What might you ask next?

Candidate says:

"We eventually decided not to continue the ministry."

What might you ask next?

Candidate says:

"That was probably the most joyful period of my ministry."

What might you ask next?

There is no single correct follow-up. What matters is whether you are genuinely listening to what the candidate has given you.

---

19. Follow-Up Questions to Keep Nearby

When you are uncertain what to ask next, return to a few simple questions:

Tell us more about that.

What happened next?

Who else was involved?

What surprised you?

What did you learn?

What was your part in that?

How did others respond?

Did your understanding change?

What would you do differently now?

How has that experience shaped you?

You do not need a hundred follow-up questions. You need curiosity.

A Quick Listening Card

During an interview, listen for:

When You Hear…	Become Curious About…
"I learned…"	What taught them?
"We decided…"	Who participated?
"They resisted…"	What were people experiencing?
"I realized…"	What changed their understanding?
"It failed…"	What happened afterward?
"It worked…"	Who made it possible?

When You Hear…	Become Curious About…
"I changed…"	What caused the change?
"We struggled…"	How did they respond?
"I was surprised…"	What did they discover?
"Looking back…"	What do they see differently now?

Keep this nearby if it helps. Then forget about it when the conversation becomes interesting.

Leader's Note

Good follow-up questions cannot be fully prepared because you do not yet know what the candidate will say. That is precisely their value.

The committee that is thinking about its next prepared question while the candidate is answering the current one will miss the openings that matter most.

Listen for the phrase that carries weight.

Notice the person who suddenly appears in the story.

Hear the moment when confidence becomes uncertainty, accomplishment becomes learning, or difficulty becomes formation.

Then ask the question that curiosity naturally creates.

The first question opens the door. The follow-up walks through it.

FM 4.3

Ministry Scenario Builder

Purpose

Story questions help you learn from a candidate's past experience. Scenario questions help you explore how a candidate might approach a situation they have not encountered in exactly the same form.

A good scenario does not ask:

"What is the right thing to do?"

It asks:

"How would you begin thinking about this?"

Ministry rarely presents pastors with problems that have one correct answer. Situations involve people, relationships, history, competing values, incomplete information, institutional responsibilities, theology, and unpredictable consequences.

A well-designed scenario lets the committee listen for how a candidate:

- notices what matters
- gathers information
- listens to people
- understands relationships and systems
- identifies competing values
- uses authority
- involves others
- makes decisions
- reflects theologically
- responds to uncertainty

Use this worksheet to create scenarios from situations that matter to your congregation.

---

1. Begin With What You Want to Understand

Do not begin by inventing a difficult situation. Begin with the question:

What are we trying to learn about this candidate?

We want to understand how this candidate approaches:

☐ Congregational change

☐ Differences or disagreement

☐ Staff relationships

☐ Session or governing board relationships

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Worship

☐ Mission

☐ Community engagement

☐ Leadership development

☐ Boundaries

☐ Decision-making

☐ Crisis

☐ Competing priorities

☐ Stewardship or finances

☐ Other: _____

Specifically, we want to understand:

_____

_____

_____

2. Choose a Real Ministry Situation

The best scenarios feel like ministry. They need not be dramatic.

Consider situations such as:

- a beloved ministry is no longer sustainable
- worship attendance is declining

- a new ministry is attracting people who are not part of the congregation
- two respected leaders strongly disagree
- staff members are experiencing tension
- the session wants action before the congregation is ready
- the congregation wants the pastor to solve a problem that belongs to the congregation
- a community need emerges that was not part of the church's plans
- a major donor objects to a decision
- a long-standing tradition is preventing another ministry from developing
- a new idea generates both excitement and anxiety
- volunteers are exhausted
- an important ministry has lost its leader

Our situation:

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Make the Scenario Particular

Generic scenarios produce generic answers.

Compare:

Generic

“What would you do if there were conflict in the church?”

with:

Particular

“Two respected elders strongly disagree about whether the congregation should continue a long-standing ministry. Both have significant support in the congregation, and each believes the future of the church is at stake.”

The second gives the candidate something concrete to think about.

Add enough detail to make the situation real.

Who is involved?

_____

What is happening?

Why does it matter?

What makes the situation difficult?

---

4. Do Not Solve the Scenario Before You Ask It

A scenario loses its usefulness if the committee has already decided what the candidate should do.

Before using it, ask yourselves:

Do we have a preferred answer?

☐ No — we genuinely want to hear how the candidate thinks.

☐ Somewhat — we need to be careful not to evaluate only for agreement.

☐ Yes — this may not be a good scenario.

A scenario should reveal a candidate's process of discernment, not test whether the candidate can guess yours.

---

5. Give the Candidate Incomplete Information

Real ministry begins with incomplete information. Your scenario should too.

Do not provide every fact.

Instead, allow the candidate to ask questions.

For example:

“You have been pastor for six months. Several members tell you that the youth ministry is failing and that the youth director needs to be replaced. What would you do?”

A thoughtful candidate may not immediately tell you what they would do.

They may ask:

How many people have raised the concern?

Have they spoken with the youth director?

What does the youth director say?

Who supervises the position?

What does 'failing' mean?

What has happened in the ministry?

Those questions are themselves part of the answer.

Information we will give initially:

Information we will provide only if the candidate asks:

---

6. Ask for the Beginning, Not the Solution

Avoid:

"What would you do?"

That question can encourage candidates to jump directly toward action.

Instead ask:

"How would you begin approaching this situation?"

Or:

"What would you want to understand before deciding what to do?"

Or:

“What would you be paying attention to?”

Or:

“Who would you want to talk with?”

This lets you hear the candidate's process before hearing a solution.

Our opening question:

_____

_____

_____

7. Listen to the Questions the Candidate Asks

The candidate's questions may be one of the most valuable parts of a scenario exercise.

Notice whether they ask about:

☐ People.

☐ Relationships.

☐ History.

☐ Previous decisions.

☐ Congregational culture.

☐ Who has authority.

☐ Who has already been consulted.

☐ Who has not been heard.

☐ The surrounding community.

☐ Denominational requirements.

☐ Practical constraints.

☐ Theology or values.

☐ Something else: _____

Questions the candidate asked:

Do not assume that a candidate who asks many questions is avoiding the scenario. They may be showing you how they enter one.

---

8. Add Information Gradually

After the candidate begins responding, add another piece of information.

For example:

"You learn that the youth director has never been told there are concerns."

Then ask:

"Does that change anything for you?"

Later:

"You discover that most of the complaints are coming from three families whose children graduated several years ago."

Ask:

"What are you noticing now?"

Let the scenario unfold.

Additional information #1:

Possible follow-up:

Additional information #2:

Possible follow-up:

Additional information #3:

Possible follow-up:

You do not need to use every piece of information. Follow the conversation.

9. Introduce a Competing Value

The most useful ministry scenarios rarely involve good versus bad. They involve good versus good.

For example:

Tradition and innovation

Pastoral care and accountability

Urgency and participation

Confidentiality and transparency

Individual needs and congregational needs

Mission and institutional sustainability

Pastoral authority and shared leadership

Hospitality and boundaries

Financial responsibility and risk

Peace and necessary change

What values are in tension in our scenario?

_____ and _____

Why do both matter?

This tension makes the scenario more realistic.

---

10. Ask Who Needs to Be Involved

A candidate's understanding of leadership often becomes visible when you ask:

“Who else needs to be part of this?”

Listen for whether the candidate imagines ministry primarily as something the pastor does or as work carried by a community of leadership.

Possible follow-ups:

Who would you talk with first?

Who has authority here?

Whose voice might easily be overlooked?

Who should participate in the decision?

What belongs to you as pastor?

What does not belong to you?

---

11. Add Resistance

Ministry rarely proceeds exactly as planned.

Once the candidate describes an approach, consider adding:

“Suppose several influential members strongly oppose that approach.”

Then ask:

What would you want to understand about their resistance?

Or:

“Suppose the session wants you to act much more quickly.”

Ask:

How would you respond?

Or:

“Suppose the person most affected refuses to participate in the conversation.”

Ask:

What changes for you?

Resistance helps you hear how the candidate responds when leadership becomes complicated.

---

12. Add an Unexpected Development

A scenario becomes especially useful when new information disrupts the obvious answer.

For example:

“Two weeks later, you learn that a community organization is willing to partner with the congregation.”

Or:

“The person you assumed was opposing the proposal tells you privately that they actually support it but are worried about how quickly the change is happening.”

Ask:

“How does this change your thinking?”

Listen for adaptability. Can the candidate revise an approach when the situation changes?

---

13. Ask About Theology

Do not force theological language into every scenario.

But when appropriate, ask:

“Where does your faith enter your thinking about this?”

Or:

“Are there theological convictions shaping how you would approach this?”

Or:

“What do you think the Church is called to embody in a situation like this?”

Listen for theology that informs practice rather than theology added afterward to justify a decision.

---

14. Ask About Self-Awareness

Toward the end of the scenario, consider asking:

What about this situation would be difficult for you personally?

Where might you need help?

What would you need to watch in yourself?

Who might you consult?

What part of this situation would give you energy?

These questions move the conversation from technique toward formation.

---

15. Do Not Turn the Scenario Into a Trap

Avoid hidden information designed to make the candidate fail.

For example:

“Actually, the person you just said you would talk to is the one causing the problem.”

That is not discernment; it is a game.

New information should deepen the scenario, not invalidate what the candidate has already said.

The candidate should experience the exercise as:

“Help us understand how you think.”

Not:

“Let's see if you can figure out what we're thinking.”

---

16. Do Not Use Your Congregation's Actual Conflict in Disguise

A scenario may be inspired by a real congregational experience, but be careful.

Changing the names while describing an unresolved congregational dispute can create several problems.

The committee may already be emotionally invested in the outcome.

Members may evaluate the candidate according to which “side” the candidate appears to support.

And the candidate may unknowingly be entering a conflict they do not understand.

If a real issue is important enough for a future pastor to know, eventually tell the candidate about it. Do not hide it inside a hypothetical scenario.

---

17. Build the Scenario

Use this template.

What do we want to understand?

The situation:

People involved:

Competing values:

_____ / _____

Information provided initially:

_____

_____

Opening question:

How would you begin approaching this situation?

Or our version:

_____

_____

Information we might add:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Follow-up questions we might use:

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. Test the Scenario

Before using it, ask:

☐ Does this resemble a situation that could actually occur in ministry?

☐ Does it explore something relevant to our congregation?

☐ Is there more than one reasonable response?

☐ Have we avoided building our preferred solution into the scenario?

☐ Does the candidate have enough information to begin?

☐ Is there information they can discover by asking questions?

☐ Can the scenario reveal process rather than merely outcome?

☐ Can we introduce additional information naturally?

☐ Are there competing values?

☐ Are we prepared to be surprised by the candidate's approach?

If you cannot answer yes to most of these questions, revise the scenario.

---

19. After the Scenario

Do not evaluate only the candidate's final answer; attend to the process.

Ask:

What did the candidate notice first?

What questions did they ask?

Whom did they want to involve?

What values did they recognize?

How did they understand their own role?

How did they respond when new information appeared?

Did their thinking change?

What did we learn about how this candidate approaches ministry?

20. A Sample Scenario

What We Want to Understand

How does the candidate approach change, shared leadership, and congregational anxiety?

Scenario

Your congregation has held a community dinner every Wednesday evening for more than twenty years. Attendance from the congregation has steadily declined, volunteers are exhausted, and the ministry now serves fewer than fifteen people most weeks.

At the same time, several younger adults in the congregation have begun asking whether the church could use its kitchen and fellowship hall to partner with a nearby organization serving families experiencing food insecurity.

Several long-time members strongly oppose ending the Wednesday dinner because they believe it is part of the congregation's identity.

You have been pastor for eight months.

How would you begin approaching this situation?

Then stop. Let the candidate decide what they need to know.

Possible information to add later:

The session is divided.

The church has enough money to continue the dinner.

Several exhausted volunteers say they will resign if nothing changes.

No one has spoken with the people who currently attend the dinner.

Then continue the conversation.

There is no single correct solution. That is why the scenario is useful.

Leader's Note

A ministry scenario is not primarily a test of what a candidate knows. It allows you to watch someone think.

Do they rush toward a solution?

Do they become curious?

Do they notice people?

Do they ask about history?

Do they recognize authority and boundaries?

Do they see competing values?

Do they involve others?

Can new information change their thinking?

Can they say, **“I don't know enough yet”?**

That may be one of the most important answers you hear.

Good pastoral leadership does not require an immediate answer to every situation. Often it begins by knowing what must be understood before an answer is possible.

FM 4.4

Interview Question Bank

Purpose

This is a question bank, not an interview plan.

These questions are resources for moments when the committee needs help finding a way into an important conversation. They are not a standard list to ask every candidate.

Choose questions because they help you explore something you genuinely need to understand.

Whenever possible, begin with questions created specifically for the candidate through **FM 2.3 — From Observation to Conversation** and **FM 4.1 — Building Story Questions**.

Then listen.

Use **FM 4.2 — Follow-Up Question Guide** to go deeper.

A good interview may use only a handful of questions from this bank.

---

1. Vocation and Call

Story Questions

Tell us about the journey that brought you into ministry.

Tell us about a time when your sense of call became especially clear.

Tell us about a ministry experience that reminded you why you became a pastor.

Tell us about a season when your understanding of your vocation changed.

Who or what has most shaped your understanding of pastoral ministry?

Questions for the Present Moment

What is giving you life in ministry right now?

What are you becoming increasingly curious about?

What has led you to begin listening for another call?

What are you hoping might become possible in the next season of your ministry?

What are you listening for as you discern your next call?

---

2. Spiritual Life and Formation

Tell us about an experience that significantly shaped your faith.

How has your spiritual life changed during your years in ministry?

What practices help sustain you?

Tell us about a season when ministry challenged your faith.

Who has influenced your spiritual formation?

Where are you experiencing growth in your own life right now?

What have the congregations you have served taught you about God?

What theological conviction has become more important to you over time?

Is there something you once understood differently than you do now? What changed?

---

3. Preaching

Tell us how a sermon usually develops for you—from the first encounter with the text to Sunday morning.

Tell us about a sermon that changed while you were preparing it. What happened?

How do the lives of the congregation and community enter your preaching?

Tell us about a time when something you preached generated an unexpected response.

How has your preaching changed over the years?

What kind of feedback about preaching is useful to you?

How do you decide when a difficult subject belongs in the pulpit?

What are you trying to make possible when you preach?

Follow the answer with:

Can you give us an example?

---

4. Worship

Tell us about a worship service that remains especially meaningful to you. What made it meaningful?

How do you approach worship planning with other people?

Tell us about a time when you introduced something new into worship.

What have you learned about honoring tradition while allowing worship to develop?

How do you think about the relationship between worship and the congregation's life beyond Sunday morning?

What role do music, silence, prayer, sacraments, and the arts play in your understanding of worship?

---

5. Pastoral Care

Be careful not to invite candidates to disclose confidential information.

Without identifying anyone, tell us about a pastoral relationship that taught you something important about caring for people.

Tell us about a time when you discovered that what someone needed from you was different from what you initially thought they needed.

How do you decide what pastoral care belongs personally to the pastor and what can be shared with others?

Tell us about something you have learned about accompanying people through grief.

What have you learned about your own limits in pastoral care?

How do you establish healthy pastoral boundaries?

When do you recognize that someone needs care beyond what you can appropriately provide?

---

6. Leadership

Avoid asking:

"What is your leadership style?"

Instead ask:

Tell us about a time when your leadership helped a congregation move somewhere it needed to go.

Tell us about a decision that taught you something important about leadership.

Tell us about a time when you realized you needed to change the way you were leading.

What have congregations taught you about leadership?

Tell us about a time when you needed to lead but did not have the formal authority to make the decision yourself.

How do you know when to lead from the front and when to make room for someone else to lead?

Tell us about a time when someone else's leadership changed your approach.

---

7. Shared Leadership and Developing Others

Tell us about someone whose gifts for ministry you helped discover.

Tell us about a ministry that became stronger when you gave away some leadership.

Tell us about a time when someone else had a better idea than yours.

How do you respond when a church member wants to begin something you had never imagined?

Tell us about a team you especially enjoyed working with. What made it work?

Tell us about something you began that continued successfully without you.

How do you respond when someone has gifts but lacks confidence to use them?

What do you hope church leaders become through serving alongside you?

---

8. Staff Relationships

For candidates who will supervise or work as part of a staff:

Tell us about a staff team that worked particularly well together. What made that possible?

Tell us about a staff relationship that taught you something about yourself.

How do you approach supervision?

How do you give difficult feedback?

How do you prefer to receive feedback?

Tell us about a time when you and another staff member disagreed about how something should be handled.

How do you clarify authority and responsibility among staff members?

What do you need from colleagues in order to do your best work?

---

9. Differences and Disagreement

Tell us about a time when you and someone you respected saw an important issue differently.

Tell us about a disagreement that taught you something.

How do you respond when someone strongly criticizes a decision you have made?

Tell us about a time when listening to someone who disagreed with you changed your understanding.

Tell us about a disagreement that was never fully resolved. How did you continue the relationship?

What have you learned about yourself when you are under pressure?

When disagreement becomes intense, what helps you remain curious about the other person?

---

10. Change

Tell us about a significant change you helped a congregation navigate.

Tell us about a change you believed was important but others were not ready to make.

Tell us about a time when you realized you were moving too quickly.

Tell us about a change you initially supported but later reconsidered.

What have you learned about why congregations resist change?

How do you distinguish between resistance that needs to be worked through and resistance that may be telling you something important?

Tell us about a time when a congregation surprised you with its capacity to change.

---

11. Mission

Tell us about a ministry beyond the congregation that has been especially meaningful to you.

Tell us about a time when something happening in the community changed what the congregation did.

Tell us about a relationship beyond the church that changed your understanding of mission.

How have you helped a congregation listen to its surrounding community?

Tell us about a time when a congregation discovered a gift it could offer its community.

Tell us about a ministry that began with a community relationship rather than a church program.

How do you understand the relationship between congregational vitality and mission?

---

12. Community Engagement

When you arrive in a new community, how do you begin learning the place?

Tell us about an important relationship you developed with someone outside the congregation.

Who do you believe pastors need to know in the communities they serve?

Tell us about a community partnership that surprised you.

How do you help a congregation move from serving people to developing relationships with people?

Tell us about something you learned from your community that you could not have learned inside the church.

---

13. Evangelism and Congregational Growth

Be careful with questions that assume the pastor's job is to "grow the church." Instead ask:

How do you understand evangelism?

Tell us about a time when someone found their way into congregational life through a relationship rather than a church program.

What have you learned about why people who are not currently part of churches become curious about Christian community?

Tell us about a congregation that developed meaningful relationships with people who were not already connected to it.

What do you believe makes a congregation inviting beyond simply being friendly when people arrive?

How do you understand the relationship among mission, evangelism, and congregational vitality?

---

14. Children and Youth

Tell us about something children or young people have taught you about ministry.

How do you understand the place of children and youth within the whole congregation?

Tell us about a ministry in which young people exercised genuine leadership.

How have you developed relationships with families?

What responsibilities for children and youth belong to the pastor, and what belongs to the congregation?

How do you help a congregation hear the voices of younger people?

---

15. Older Adults

What have older adults taught you about ministry?

How do you help a congregation value older members without assuming that all older adults want the same things?

Tell us about a ministry in which older adults discovered a new vocation.

How do you think about pastoral care, spiritual formation, and mission among people in later life?

How have you encouraged relationships across generations?

---

16. Teaching and Spiritual Formation

Tell us about a teaching experience that changed because of the people in the room.

How do you help adults move beyond acquiring information toward spiritual formation?

What do you most enjoy teaching?

Tell us about a question someone asked that changed a class or conversation.

How do you approach teaching when people hold significantly different theological perspectives?

What have you learned about helping people become more comfortable asking difficult questions about faith?

---

17. Theology

Theological questions should create conversation, not an oral examination.

What theological conviction most shapes the way you practice ministry?

Tell us about a theological conviction that has deepened or changed over time.

Where does grace become visible in your understanding of congregational life?

How does your understanding of the Church shape your leadership?

How do you understand what God is doing in the world beyond the Church?

How does the incarnation shape your understanding of ministry?

What does it mean to you to say that Christ is Lord of the Church?

How does your theology affect the way you respond when people disagree?

When an answer becomes abstract:

"Can you tell us about a time when that conviction shaped something you actually did?"

---

18. Denominational Identity and Polity

Adapt these questions to your tradition.

What do you value about serving within our denomination?

How does our tradition shape your understanding of pastoral leadership?

Tell us about a time when polity helped a congregation navigate a difficult situation.

How do you understand the relationship between pastor and governing body?

What does shared governance look like when it is working well?

How have you participated in the wider life of the Church?

Where have you experienced tension between congregational desires and denominational responsibilities? How did you navigate it?

---

19. Decision-Making

Tell us about an important decision you made that required considerable discernment.

Who do you consult when you are uncertain?

Tell us about a decision you made with incomplete information.

Tell us about a decision you changed after hearing from others.

How do you know when enough consultation has taken place and it is time to act?

Tell us about a decision you wish you had made differently.

---

20. Failure, Mistakes, and Resilience

Do not ask candidates to perform vulnerability. Create room for honest reflection.

Tell us about something in ministry that did not go the way you hoped.

Tell us about a decision you would make differently today.

Tell us about a time when you needed help.

Tell us about a season when ministry was especially difficult. What sustained you?

What mistake has taught you something you still carry into ministry?

How do you recognize when you need to stop, reconsider, or ask for help?

How have disappointments shaped you as a pastor?

---

21. Self-Awareness

What gives you energy in ministry?

What consistently drains you?

What kind of work do you tend to postpone?

What do people who work closely with you learn they need to tell you directly?

What kind of feedback is hardest for you to hear?

What do you need from colleagues and congregational leaders in order to thrive?

What are you learning about yourself at this point in your ministry?

Where do you know you need gifts that other people bring?

---

22. Boundaries and Sustainability

What have you learned about sustaining yourself for ministry?

How do you protect time away from pastoral responsibilities?

How do you respond when congregational expectations exceed what one pastor can reasonably do?

Tell us about a time when you needed to establish a difficult boundary.

How do you decide what requires your personal attention and what can be entrusted to someone else?

What signs tell you that you are becoming depleted?

Who has permission to tell you that you need to slow down?

---

23. Administration

What administrative responsibilities do you handle well?

Which ones require more intentional discipline from you?

Tell us about a system or process you improved.

How do you keep commitments and follow through on details?

How do you approach work that is necessary but does not particularly energize you?

What administrative responsibilities should belong to the pastor, and what should belong elsewhere?

---

24. Stewardship and Finances

How do you understand the relationship between money and discipleship?

Tell us about a time when you helped a congregation have a difficult conversation about money.

What role do you believe the pastor should have in stewardship?

How do you respond when financial anxiety begins driving congregational decisions?

Tell us about a time when limited resources required creative thinking.

How do you help congregations move from scarcity toward faithful stewardship without denying genuine financial realities?

---

25. Congregational Culture

When you enter a congregation, how do you begin understanding its culture?

Tell us about something you misunderstood about a congregation when you first arrived.

How do you learn how decisions are really made?

What do you pay attention to during your first year?

Tell us about a congregation whose culture was significantly different from your own expectations. What did you learn?

How do you decide what should be honored, what should be questioned, and what simply needs time?

---

26. Beginning a New Ministry

What would you want to understand about us before beginning ministry here?

What would you want to learn during your first six months?

Who would you want to know?

What would you be careful not to do too quickly?

What would you hope the congregation would understand about you during the first year?

What would help us establish a healthy partnership from the beginning?

What do you believe a congregation owes a new pastor during the first year?

What does a new pastor owe the congregation?

27. Questions About This Particular Call

As mutual discernment deepens:

What about this congregation has made you curious?

Where do you see possible connections between your vocation and our congregation's story?

What have you heard from us that gives you energy?

What have you heard that gives you pause?

What questions about us are becoming more important as our conversations continue?

Is there anything you have learned about us that has surprised you?

Where do you imagine you might stretch us?

Where do you imagine we might stretch you?

What possibilities for shared ministry are you beginning to imagine?

28. Questions for a Second or Later Interview

Later interviews should deepen earlier conversations rather than simply introduce new subjects.

Last time you said _____. We found ourselves thinking about that afterward. Would you tell us more?

You told us the story of _____. How has that experience continued to shape you?

There was something we did not have enough time to explore last time…

One question emerged for us after our previous conversation…

Has anything from our last conversation stayed with you?

Have any new questions about us emerged since we last talked?

Is there anything you would answer differently after having more time to think?

What are you noticing now about the possibility of ministry with us?

---

29. Questions That Invite Mutual Discernment

These are especially useful as the relationship deepens.

What would you need from us to do your best ministry?

What might make ministry here difficult for you?

What would you hope we would tell you when things are not going well?

How would you want us to handle differences with you?

What kind of relationship would you hope to develop with our governing body?

What expectations would you want clarified before accepting a call?

What are you still trying to discern about us?

What would you need to know before you could say yes?

---

30. Questions to End a Conversation

Near the end of an interview:

What haven't we asked that you hoped we would?

Is there something important about your ministry we haven't given you an opportunity to tell us?

What would you like to know about us?

What questions are you carrying away from this conversation?

For later interviews:

What do you think we should be talking about next?

That question may itself reveal where the candidate believes mutual discernment needs to go.

Questions to Use Carefully

Some familiar interview questions are not necessarily bad, but they often produce predictable or rehearsed answers.

Instead of:

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Consider:

What part of ministry brings out your best work? What part requires more intentional effort from you?

Instead of:

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Consider:

What are you hoping to learn or become in the next season of ministry?

Instead of:

What is your leadership style?

Consider:

Tell us about a leadership experience that taught you something important about the way you lead.

Instead of:

How do you handle conflict?

Consider:

Tell us about a time when you and someone you respected saw something important differently.

Instead of:

What is your greatest failure?

Consider:

Tell us about something in ministry that did not go as you hoped. What did you learn?

Instead of:

How will you grow our church?

Consider:

Tell us about a congregation that developed meaningful relationships with people beyond its existing membership. What helped make that possible?

Questions to Avoid

Some questions do not belong in a pastoral interview.

Do not ask questions about protected personal characteristics or private matters that are unrelated to the requirements of the call. Employment law and denominational requirements vary, so consult the appropriate denominational or legal guidance when uncertain.

Be particularly careful about questions concerning matters such as:

- age
- disability or medical history
- pregnancy
- marital status
- family planning

- race or ethnicity
- national origin
- other legally protected characteristics

Do not try to obtain indirectly information that would be inappropriate to request directly.

Also avoid questions designed primarily to:

- embarrass the candidate
- test whether they agree with a committee member
- provoke controversy for its own sake
- expose confidential pastoral information
- force disclosure of another person's story
- demonstrate the interviewer's theological knowledge
- catch the candidate making a mistake

A difficult question may be entirely appropriate. A trap is not.

Building Our Interview

Before selecting questions from this bank, write:

The three things we most need to understand:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now choose or create questions that help you explore those things.

Question One

Why are we asking it?

Question Two

Why are we asking it?

Question Three

Why are we asking it?

Question Four

Why are we asking it?

Question Five

Why are we asking it?

Now look at the list. Could you remove one? Probably.

The Question Behind the Question

Before asking any interview question, the committee should be able to answer:

What are we genuinely trying to understand?

If you cannot answer that, you probably do not need the question.

After asking it, remember that the candidate's answer may take you somewhere more important than the question itself.

Use the bank to get started. Then let curiosity take over.

Leader's Note

There is a temptation to believe that a better interview requires better questions. Only partly.

A committee can ask excellent questions badly.

It can rush through them.

It can listen only for preferred answers.

It can ask questions whose answers do not affect discernment.

It can become so committed to covering twelve topics that it never discovers the person sitting across the table.

This bank exists so you do not have to invent every question from scratch. It is a pantry, not a menu.

Take what you need. Adapt it to the candidate. Ask fewer questions than you think you need.

And when one of them opens a door into a story that matters, leave the question bank behind and walk through the door

FM 4.5

Questions to Avoid

Purpose

Some interview questions fail because they produce predictable answers; others reveal the answer the committee wants to hear.

Some ask candidates to speculate about situations they do not yet understand, invite inappropriate disclosure, or turn conversation into examination.

Some questions simply should not be asked.

This guide helps committees recognize problematic questions and, when the underlying concern is legitimate, turn them into better ones.

The goal is not to make interviews timid.

Ask difficult questions when they matter.

Ask them fairly, openly, and because the answer will contribute to discernment.

---

1. Avoid Questions With a Preferred Answer

Consider:

“We believe strongly in shared leadership. How do you empower lay leaders?”

The candidate has already been told the preferred answer.

You will probably hear it back.

Instead ask:

“Tell us about a ministry in which leadership was shared among several people. How did that work?”

Or:

“Tell us about someone whose gifts for leadership you helped develop.”

Then listen for how the candidate actually understands shared leadership.

---

2. Avoid Questions That Ask Candidates to Praise Your Priorities

Avoid:

How important is mission to you?

Do you value children and youth?

Do you believe pastoral care is important?

Do you think churches should engage their communities?

Do you believe pastors should be collaborative?

Few candidates will answer:

"No."

Instead ask for experience.

Ask:

Tell us about a ministry beyond the congregation that has been meaningful to you.

Tell us about something children or young people have taught you about ministry.

Tell us about a pastoral relationship that shaped the way you care for people.

Tell us about a relationship in the community that changed something your congregation did.

Tell us about a ministry that became better because other people helped shape it.

---

3. Avoid Questions That Are Too Large

Some questions are so broad that they invite generalities.

Avoid:

What is your theology?

What is your philosophy of ministry?

What is your vision for the Church?

What is your leadership style?

These may begin interesting conversations, but they often produce polished summaries rather than reflection.

Narrow the question and move from abstraction toward story.

Instead of:

What is your theology?

Ask:

“What theological conviction most shapes the way you practice ministry?”

Instead of:

What is your philosophy of ministry?

Ask:

“What have you come to believe matters most in pastoral ministry?”

Then ask:

“Can you tell us about an experience that taught you that?”

---

4. Avoid Questions the Candidate Cannot Yet Answer

A candidate who has read your Ministry Discernment Profile and visited your website still knows relatively little about your congregation.

Be cautious about asking:

What is your vision for our congregation?

What would you change here?

What would your first major initiative be?

How would you grow our church?

What ministries should we eliminate?

A thoughtful candidate may properly answer:

“I don't know you well enough yet.”

That is not evasive; it may be good pastoral judgment.

Instead ask:

How do you begin learning a congregation when you arrive?

What would you want to understand about us during your first six months?

Who would you want to listen to?

What would you be careful not to do too quickly?

Tell us about a time when listening changed what you initially thought a congregation needed.

---

5. Avoid Hypotheticals When a Story Would Be Better

Avoid:

What would you do if two elders disagreed?

if you could ask:

"Tell us about a time when two respected leaders saw an important issue differently. How did you enter that situation?"

Past experience generally provides more useful information than speculation.

Use hypothetical situations intentionally when you want to observe a candidate's thinking process. That is the purpose of **FM 4.3 — Ministry Scenario Builder**.

Do not use hypotheticals simply because they are easier to invent than good story questions.

---

6. Avoid Questions That Turn Your Congregation's Problem Into the Candidate's Problem

A congregation may be anxious about attendance, finances, children, differences, or its future.

Do not ask:

How will you bring young families into our church?

How will you increase giving?

How will you get our members to volunteer?

How will you fix our conflict?

How will you grow our congregation?

These questions quietly communicate:

We have a problem. We are hiring you to solve it.

Pastoral ministry is partnership, not problem transfer.

Instead ask:

Tell us about a congregation that developed new relationships with people beyond its existing membership.

Tell us about a time when financial anxiety was affecting a congregation's decisions.

What have you learned about helping people discover their gifts for ministry?

Tell us about a congregation learning to live faithfully with significant differences.

Then be prepared to tell the candidate what **your congregation** is willing to contribute to the work.

---

7. Avoid Asking the Candidate to Criticize a Previous Congregation

Avoid:

What was wrong with your last church?

Why couldn't they change?

Who caused the conflict?

Was your session supportive?

What were the difficult people like?

A candidate's previous congregation has entrusted them with pastoral relationships.

Do not reward a breach of that trust.

Instead ask:

What did that congregation teach you?

What was difficult about that season of ministry?

What did you learn about yourself?

Looking back, is there anything you would approach differently?

Listen carefully to how candidates speak about people who are not in the room.

---

8. Avoid Inviting Breaches of Pastoral Confidentiality

Avoid:

Tell us about the most difficult counseling case you handled.

What was the worst family situation you encountered?

Tell us about a member with a serious mental health problem.

What confidential situations have you had to manage?

Even without names, details can identify people.

Instead ask:

"Without identifying anyone, tell us about something pastoral care has taught you about accompanying people through difficult seasons."

Or:

"How do you recognize when someone's needs extend beyond what you can appropriately provide as pastor?"

A candidate's respect for other people's stories should count in their favor; do not ask them to violate that respect to impress you.

---

9. Avoid Questions Designed to Expose Weakness

Avoid:

What is your greatest weakness?

What is your biggest failure?

What is the worst mistake you ever made?

These questions often produce rehearsed vulnerability rather than useful self-awareness:

“Sometimes I care too much.”

Instead ask:

Tell us about something in ministry that did not go the way you hoped.

Tell us about a decision you would make differently today.

What part of ministry requires more intentional effort from you?

Tell us about a time when you needed help.

Listen for learning rather than confession.

---

10. Avoid Questions That Ask Candidates to Rank Themselves

Avoid:

Are you a good preacher?

Are you an effective administrator?

Are you good with young people?

Are you a strong leader?

Self-ratings tell you little. Ask for evidence instead:

How has your preaching changed over time?

Tell us about an administrative process you improved.

Tell us about something young people have taught you.

Tell us about a leadership experience that changed the way you lead.

---

11. Avoid Double and Triple Questions

Avoid:

"Tell us about your preaching, how you prepare sermons, how you involve current events, and how you think preaching relates to pastoral care."

Which question should the candidate answer? Ask one, listen, then ask the next if it still matters.

Better:

"Tell us how a sermon usually develops for you."

Then perhaps:

"How does the life of the congregation enter that process?"

One question at a time creates conversation.

---

12. Avoid Speeches Disguised as Questions

Sometimes an interviewer wants to make a point rather than ask a question.

The question begins:

"Our congregation has always believed very strongly that…"

Three minutes later:

“So how do you feel about that?”

The candidate has learned a great deal about the committee member and little has been learned about the candidate.

If context is necessary, provide it briefly, then ask the question.

Better yet, when possible, ask first and listen before explaining your own perspective.

---

13. Avoid Theological Examinations

Theology matters enormously in pastoral discernment, but the interview need not become an oral seminary examination.

Be cautious with:

Explain the doctrine of the Trinity.

Which theory of the atonement do you affirm?

Define justification.

What is the correct interpretation of…?

When legitimate theological boundaries need to be explored, ask about them directly.

Most theological discernment is richer when theology is connected to ministry.

Ask:

What theological conviction most shapes your preaching?

How does your understanding of grace affect the way you lead?

How does your understanding of the Church shape your relationship with the congregation?

Tell us about a time when a theological conviction affected a difficult ministry decision.

Then follow the answer.

14. Avoid Questions Designed to Produce Agreement

Be careful with:

Do you agree that…?

Wouldn't you say…?

Don't you think…?

Surely you believe…?

These are requests for agreement disguised as questions.

If the committee needs to know a candidate's position on something important, ask directly:

"How do you understand…?"

Or:

"What is your position on…?"

Then allow the candidate to answer.

Clarity is more useful than manufactured agreement.

15. Avoid Political or Social Questions Used as Loyalty Tests

Some social, ethical, and political matters genuinely affect congregational ministry and may need to be discussed.

When they do, discuss them openly rather than as loyalty tests.

Instead of:

Are you conservative or progressive?

consider questions such as:

How do you preach when people in the congregation hold sharply different political convictions?

How do your theological convictions shape your engagement with public issues?

Tell us about a time when an ethical issue created significant differences within a congregation. How did you approach it?

When a specific theological or ethical position genuinely matters to the congregation, say so plainly and invite an honest conversation.

---

16. Avoid Questions About Protected or Irrelevant Personal Matters

Some questions may be inappropriate or legally restricted in an employment process.

Requirements vary by jurisdiction, denomination, and the nature of the position. Follow denominational guidance and obtain appropriate legal advice when necessary.

Do not assume that every personal question is appropriate because a congregation is a religious organization.

Be particularly careful about questions involving matters such as:

- age
- disability or medical history
- pregnancy
- marital status
- family planning
- race or ethnicity
- national origin
- other protected personal characteristics

Do not seek indirectly information you should not request directly.

When uncertain, do not ask until you have checked.

---

17. Avoid Questions About Family Members That Treat Them as Part of the Call

A congregation calls a pastor, not the pastor's spouse, partner, or children.

Avoid questions that assume family members will participate in congregational life in particular ways.

Avoid:

Will your spouse be active in the church?

What ministries does your spouse enjoy?

Will your children participate in youth group?

How does your family feel about being a pastor's family?

Hospitality toward families is appropriate; expectations of unpaid ministry are not.

As the relationship deepens, candidates may naturally discuss relocation, schools, employment, housing, and family needs. Make room for those conversations without treating family members as additional candidates.

---

18. Avoid Curiosity That Does Not Serve Discernment

Before asking a personal question, ask yourself:

Why do we need to know this?

If the answer is merely:

“We're curious.”

do not ask.

Candidate interviews create an unusual imbalance: people may answer because they believe they must in order to remain under consideration.

Use that power carefully.

---

19. Avoid Trick Questions

Do not create questions whose real purpose is hidden.

Examples include:

“What would you do if the organist refused to play contemporary music?”

when the committee is actually trying to discover the candidate's worship preference.

Or:

“Suppose half the congregation threatened to leave over a controversial issue…”

when the committee is really testing the candidate's position on that issue.

Ask what you actually need to know.

Trick questions reward candidates who are good at detecting traps, which is probably not the pastoral gift you are trying to discern.

---

20. Avoid “Gotcha” Follow-Ups

A difficult answer may deserve another question, but follow-up should not become cross-examination.

Avoid:

Why didn't you know better?

Didn't you realize that would happen?

Why would you possibly do that?

Don't you think that was a mistake?

Instead ask:

What were you considering at the time?

When did you begin to see the situation differently?

What did you learn afterward?

Would you approach it differently today?

Curiosity can be rigorous without becoming adversarial.

---

21. Avoid Questions You Would Not Answer Yourselves

Because this is mutual discernment, consider whether the committee would answer the congregational equivalent of a difficult question.

If you ask:

“Tell us about one of your failures.”

are you willing to tell the candidate about one of the congregation's failures?

If you ask:

“What is your greatest weakness?”

are you prepared to name the congregation's weaknesses?

If you ask:

“How do you respond to conflict?”

are you prepared to describe how your congregation actually responds to differences?

A useful test is:

Would we consider this a fair question if the candidate asked it of us?

---

22. Do Not Ask a Question You Do Not Want Answered Honestly

This may be the most important caution in this guide.

If you ask:

What concerns you about our congregation?

be prepared to hear concerns.

If you ask:

What would be difficult for you here?

do not punish the candidate for identifying something difficult.

If you ask:

Where do you disagree with us?

do not expect agreement.

If you ask:

What gives you pause about this call?

do not immediately begin defending the congregation.

An honest answer is a gift to mutual discernment. Receive it accordingly.

Repairing a Poor Question

Sometimes you will hear yourself ask a question and immediately realize it was badly framed. Repair it.

Say:

“Let me ask that differently.”

Or:

“I think I put the answer into my question. Let me try again.”

Or:

“That was too broad. What I'm really curious about is…”

Candidates do not expect perfection. A committee that recognizes and corrects its own question may reveal something healthy about how it works together.

Test Every Question

Before adding a question to the interview, ask:

☐ What are we trying to understand?

☐ Does the answer matter to our discernment?

☐ Are we asking for information the candidate can reasonably provide?

☐ Have we put our preferred answer into the question?

☐ Would a story reveal more than an opinion?

☐ Are we inviting the candidate to violate someone else's confidentiality?

☐ Is the question appropriately related to the call?

☐ Would we be willing to answer the equivalent question about ourselves?

☐ Are we prepared to receive an answer we do not expect?

If a question fails the test, rewrite it or leave it out.

Rewrite the Question

Use this exercise when a committee member proposes a question that does not quite work.

Question we were considering:

What are we actually trying to understand?

What is problematic about the original question?

☐ Preferred answer is obvious.

☐ Too broad.

☐ Too many questions at once.

☐ Asks for speculation.

☐ Invites inappropriate disclosure.

☐ Irrelevant personal information.

☐ Sounds adversarial.

☐ Tests agreement rather than understanding.

☐ Other: _____

A better question might be:

Could we make it a story question?

Leader's Note

There are few magic interview questions, and few questions are automatically terrible regardless of context.

What matters is why you ask, how you ask, and what you do with the answer.

A good question says:

We want to understand you.

A poor question often says:

We want to know whether you fit what we have already decided you should be.

And an inappropriate question says:

Our curiosity matters more than your boundaries.

Keep returning to the discipline at the center of this manual:

Notice. Become curious. Ask. Listen.

When a question does not serve that movement, you probably do not need it.

FM 4.6

Listening for Patterns During Interviews

Purpose

One answer rarely tells you enough.

A candidate may tell an impressive story about collaboration, struggle to describe shared leadership in another conversation, and later ask questions that reveal a strong preference for working independently.

None of those moments should be interpreted alone. Listen for patterns.

Patterns emerge when similar ways of thinking, relating, leading, learning, or responding appear across different stories and different conversations.

The task is not to diagnose the candidate or reduce a person to a set of traits.

It is to ask:

What are we hearing repeatedly, and what might it help us understand?

Use this guide during and after interviews to notice patterns without reaching conclusions too quickly.

---

1. Listen Across the Interview

Do not evaluate each answer as though it stands alone.

A candidate may describe:

- leading a significant change
- responding to criticism
- developing a new ministry
- working with staff
- learning from failure

Listen for what appears across those stories.

Something I have heard more than once:

It appeared when the candidate talked about:

I wonder whether this may be a pattern:

Notice the language:

I wonder.

A pattern begins as something worth exploring, not something you have proven.

---

2. Listen for How the Candidate Enters a Situation

When candidates describe difficult or unfamiliar situations, what do they tend to do first?

Do they:

☐ Ask questions?

☐ Gather information?

☐ Talk with people?

☐ Seek advice?

☐ Study the history?

☐ Clarify authority?

☐ Pray or reflect?

☐ Identify a solution?

☐ Take action?

☐ Wait?

☐ Other: _____

Across several stories, I noticed:

What might we want to explore further?

3. Listen for People

Notice how other people appear in the candidate's stories.

Who is present?

Who contributes?

Who decides?

Who gets credit?

Who creates difficulty?

Who teaches the candidate something?

Listen for:

I

we

they

Do not count pronouns or turn them into a test.

Ask instead:

What picture of relationships is emerging from these stories?

I noticed that other people are usually described as:

When something succeeds, the candidate tends to describe:

When something goes wrong, the candidate tends to describe:

Something I would like to understand better:

---

4. Listen for Agency

Pastoral leadership requires agency—the capacity to act, take responsibility, make decisions, and lead.

It also requires recognizing that ministry does not belong to the pastor alone.

Listen for how the candidate understands their own part in events.

Do you hear:

“I decided…”

“We decided…”

“The session decided…”

“Someone else suggested…”

“I realized my part was…”

“I needed to…”

“We discovered…”

Ask:

Does the candidate tend to take appropriate responsibility?

Can the candidate describe what belongs to others?

Can they describe their own contribution without making themselves the center of every story?

Can they name their own part when something went badly?

Look for balance rather than preferred vocabulary.

---

5. Listen for Curiosity

Does the candidate seem curious about people and situations?

Notice whether they describe:

- asking questions
- listening before acting
- discovering something unexpected
- changing an assumption
- learning from people unlike themselves
- noticing something they initially missed

Examples I heard:

When the candidate encounters something unfamiliar, they seem to:

Curiosity is especially visible when the candidate does not already know what to do.

---

6. Listen for Learning

Candidates will naturally tell you what they have accomplished.

Listen especially for what they have learned.

Notice phrases such as:

“I learned…”

“I began to understand…”

“Looking back…”

“I would do that differently…”

“They taught me…”

“I didn't understand at first…”

“I changed my mind…”

What experiences seem to have formed this candidate?

What lessons appear more than once?

Can the candidate connect past learning with present practice?

Naming a lesson shows reflection. Listen further for evidence that the lesson changed something.

7. Listen for Response to Difficulty

Every pastor encounters resistance, disappointment, criticism, failure, and loss.

Across different stories, what happens when ministry becomes difficult?

Does the candidate tend to:

☐ Become more curious?

☐ Seek help?

☐ Consult others?

☐ Take responsibility?

☐ Become defensive?

☐ Withdraw?

☐ Move quickly toward action?

☐ Slow down?

☐ Reconsider assumptions?

☐ Describe others primarily as the problem?

☐ Other: _____

The pattern I think I am hearing is:

Evidence from more than one story:

What would help us understand this more fully?

---

8. Listen for Response to Success

Success reveals patterns too.

When something goes well, listen for:

Who receives credit?

Who made the work possible?

What role does the candidate claim?

What happened after the candidate stepped away?

Does success become evidence of the pastor's ability or evidence of a community's growing capacity?

I noticed:

A follow-up question might be:

---

9. Listen for Change of Mind

A capacity to reconsider may be an important sign of formation.

Listen for stories in which the candidate says:

“I was wrong.”

“I hadn't understood…”

“Someone helped me see…”

“I changed my mind.”

“That wasn't what the congregation needed.”

“We tried something else.”

Then ask:

What made change possible?

I heard evidence that the candidate can reconsider:

Or:

I have not yet heard enough about this to know:

Do not mistake consistency for maturity or changing one's mind for weakness. Listen for the quality of discernment behind both.

---

10. Listen for Authority

How does the candidate understand pastoral authority?

Across stories, notice:

- who makes decisions
- when the pastor acts
- when the pastor waits
- when the governing body becomes involved
- how responsibility is shared
- whether authority is formal, relational, theological, or some combination

What pattern are we hearing?

Does the candidate seem to understand what belongs to the pastoral role?

What does the candidate entrust to others?

Where would we like greater clarity?

11. Listen for the Congregation

How does the candidate talk about congregations they have served?

Listen for language of:

- affection
- gratitude
- frustration
- partnership
- disappointment
- ownership
- distance
- respect
- curiosity

Particularly notice how candidates speak about congregations that were difficult for them.

I heard:

The candidate seems to understand congregations as:

Do not expect every previous ministry to have been positive. Listen for whether the candidate can tell a difficult story without reducing an entire congregation to its worst moments.

12. Listen for People Who Disagree

How do people who disagree with the candidate appear in their stories?

Are they described as:

1. people with legitimate concerns
2. people shaped by a different experience
3. people to be persuaded
4. obstacles
5. opponents
6. partners in discernment
7. something else

I noticed:

Does the candidate show curiosity about perspectives different from their own?

Can they describe what another person believed without caricaturing it?

Can relationships continue when agreement is not possible?

---

13. Listen for Boundaries

Pastors regularly encounter needs they cannot personally meet.

Listen for how the candidate understands:

1. time
2. availability
3. pastoral care
4. confidentiality

5. delegation
6. days off
7. emergencies
8. professional competence
9. family and personal life
10. the difference between caring and rescuing

A pattern I noticed:

Something I would like to explore further:

---

14. Listen for Mission

When candidates speak about mission, notice where the story begins.

Does mission begin primarily with:

☐ A church program?

☐ A congregational need?

☐ A community need?

☐ A relationship?

☐ Something someone noticed?

☐ An existing community partnership?

☐ A pastor's idea?

☐ A congregation's gifts?

☐ Other: _____

Listen for how the candidate understands the relationship among:

congregation

community

vocation

partnership

service

relationship

What pattern do we hear?

15. Listen for God

Candidates may use theological language frequently or sparingly.

Do not count references to God. Listen for how God functions in the story.

Is God:

1. supporting the candidate's plan?
2. present in other people?
3. encountered through Scripture?
4. discovered in the community?
5. disrupting expectations?
6. calling the congregation somewhere new?
7. present in uncertainty?
8. recognized retrospectively?

Where did theological conviction naturally enter the candidate's stories?

What does the candidate seem to believe God is doing in congregational life?

What would we like to understand more deeply?

---

16. Listen for Repeated Language

Candidates often have words or phrases they return to naturally.

Write them down without immediately interpreting them.

Words or phrases I heard repeatedly:

Ask:

What might this language reveal about what matters to the candidate?

Do not turn repeated vocabulary into psychological analysis. Use it as another opening for curiosity.

---

17. Listen for Missing Stories

Patterns can include what you have not yet heard.

Perhaps several interviews have passed and you have heard little about:

1. shared leadership
2. community relationships
3. pastoral care
4. children
5. staff
6. failure
7. worship
8. mission
9. learning
10. people who disagree
11. joy
12. theology

Do not conclude:

“The candidate doesn't care about that.”

Ask:

“Have we given the candidate an opportunity to talk about it?”

Something important we have not heard much about:

Have we asked?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If not, what might we ask?

Absence becomes meaningful only after you have created a reasonable opportunity for the subject to appear.

---

18. Distinguish a Pattern From an Incident

One uncomfortable answer is not necessarily a pattern. Neither is one extraordinary story.

Before naming something significant, ask:

Have we heard or observed this more than once?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did it appear in different kinds of conversations?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do we have specific examples?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are committee members independently noticing something similar?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have we explored it with the candidate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If most answers are no, you probably have an observation or question—not yet a pattern.

---

19. Test Competing Interpretations

The same behavior may have more than one explanation.

For example:

Observation

The candidate frequently talks about initiatives they personally began.

Possible interpretation:

The candidate may be highly entrepreneurial.

Another:

The candidate may tend to center ministry around their own leadership.

Another:

Our questions may have repeatedly asked about things the candidate initiated.

Do not choose an interpretation too quickly.

What we observed:

One possible interpretation:

Another possible interpretation:

What could we ask that might help us understand?

This discipline matters especially when the committee feels strongly about what it thinks it has discovered.

---

20. Look for Patterns Across Conversations

As interviews continue, return to earlier notes.

Emerging Pattern	Where We Heard It	What We Still Wonder

Patterns become more reliable when they appear across:

1. the candidate's written materials
2. first interview
3. later interviews
4. scenario conversations
5. candidate questions
6. reference conversations

Do not expect perfect consistency. People are more complex than patterns.

21. Pay Attention to Contradictions

Sometimes two stories seem to reveal different things. That is not necessarily a problem.

For example:

In one story, the candidate moved quickly and decisively.

In another, they listened for months before acting.

Do not ask:

“Which is the real candidate?”

Ask:

“What was different about those situations?”

Good leadership may require different responses in different contexts.

Something that seems inconsistent:

A question that might help us understand the difference:

Apparent contradictions can become some of your most useful conversations.

22. Patterns Are Not Scores

Do not convert patterns into numerical ratings.

Avoid:

Collaboration — 8

Leadership — 7

Pastoral care — 9

Conflict management — 6

Numbers create an appearance of precision that pastoral discernment does not possess.

Instead write:

"Across several stories, we heard the candidate describe inviting other people into leadership and giving them genuine authority."

Or:

"We have heard several examples of decisive action, but we still want to understand how the candidate listens before deciding."

Describe what you are noticing, then keep discerning.

---

23. Pattern or Preference?

When the committee identifies a pattern it likes or dislikes, ask:

Why does this matter?

Is it connected to:

☐ The congregation's vocation?

☐ The ministry ahead?

☐ The responsibilities of the call?

☐ The congregation's culture?

☐ A genuine concern about pastoral leadership?

Or primarily:

☐ Our preferred personality?

☐ Familiarity?

☐ Similarity to a previous pastor?

☐ Our preferred communication style?

☐ Our image of what a pastor should be?

What makes this pattern relevant to our discernment?

Not every difference matters.

24. From Pattern to Question

Do not move directly from "We noticed a pattern" to "We have reached a conclusion." Move instead toward: "We have a better question."

Pattern we think we are hearing:

Evidence:

What we still do not understand:

A question we could ask:

A story we might invite:

25. Committee Pattern Conversation

After individual reflection, ask each committee member:

"What pattern, if any, are you beginning to notice?"

Record the observations without debating them.

Member observations:

Then ask:

Which patterns are several of us noticing?

Where are our perceptions different?

What evidence do we actually have?

What deserves another conversation with the candidate?

Quick Pattern Listening Card

During interviews, listen across stories for:

Listen For	Ask Yourself
People	Who appears in the story?
Agency	What does the candidate own?
Curiosity	Do they ask before deciding?
Learning	What has changed them?
Difficulty	What happens under pressure?
Success	Who receives credit?

Listen For	Ask Yourself
Difference	How are dissenting people described?
Authority	Who decides?
Change	Can new information change their thinking?
Boundaries	What belongs to them—and what does not?
Mission	Where does ministry begin?
Theology	Where is God in the story?

Do not try to listen for all twelve at once. Listen to the person. Patterns will emerge over time.

Leader's Note

Patterns help keep a committee from giving too much weight to a single moment.

One excellent answer does not prove a gift.

One awkward answer does not establish a weakness.

One difficult story does not define a ministry.

Listen across stories.

Listen across interviews.

Listen to the questions the candidate asks as well as the answers they give.

And when you think you have discovered a pattern, resist the temptation to name the person:

“She is controlling.”

“He is collaborative.”

“She doesn't handle conflict well.”

Describe what you have actually heard instead:

“In several stories, decisions seem to move quickly from the candidate's own assessment toward action. I wonder how other people become part of the discernment.”

That observation gives you somewhere to go. The label closes the conversation.

A pattern is not a verdict. It is an invitation to become more curious.

FM 4.7

Second Interview Planning Worksheet

Purpose

The second interview should not be another first interview.

By now, you know something about the candidate. You have heard stories, noticed patterns, identified questions, and begun to imagine where this candidate's vocation and your congregation's ministry might intersect.

The purpose of the second interview is to go deeper.

Return to things that mattered in the first conversation. Explore patterns you are beginning to notice. Clarify questions that remain. Use stories and scenarios where they will help. Give the candidate an opportunity to explore your congregation more deeply as well.

The question is beginning to change.

The first interview asked:

Is there enough here for another conversation?

The second begins asking:

What would we need to understand to discern whether a partnership in ministry may be emerging?

Use this worksheet to prepare for the second interview.

---

1. Return to the First Conversation

Before creating new questions, return to **FM 3.6 — First Interview Reflection Worksheet**.

What stayed with us from the first interview?

What gave us energy?

What gave us pause?

What surprised us?

What did we say we most wanted to understand next?

Start there.

2. What Has Stayed With Us?

Some things become more significant after an interview is over.

Ask committee members:

A story I have continued thinking about:

Something the candidate said that I remember:

A question the candidate asked that stayed with me:

Something I understand differently after having time to reflect:

If several committee members keep returning to the same moment, pay attention.

3. What Has Stayed With the Candidate?

The candidate has also had time to reflect. Begin the second interview by making room for that.

Consider asking:

“Has anything from our last conversation stayed with you?”

Or:

“What have you found yourself thinking about since we last talked?”

Or:

“Have any new questions about us emerged since our first conversation?”

Our opening question:

This establishes the second interview as a continuation rather than a restart.

4. Review Emerging Patterns

Return to **FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews**.

A pattern we think we may be hearing:

Evidence:

What we still do not understand:

A question that might help:

Another possible pattern:

Evidence:

What we still do not understand:

A question that might help:

Remember: a pattern is not a conclusion. Use the second interview to test your interpretation.

5. Identify the Conversations Worth Deepening

Do not try to cover everything. Choose three or four areas that genuinely matter.

Conversation One

We want to understand more about:

Why this matters:

What we already heard:

Our opening question:

Conversation Two

We want to understand more about:

Why this matters:

What we already heard:

Our opening question:

Conversation Three

We want to understand more about:

Why this matters:

What we already heard:

Our opening question:

Conversation Four — If Needed

We want to understand more about:

Our opening question:

---

6. Return to Something the Candidate Said

One of the strongest second-interview questions begins:

"Last time you said…"

For example:

"Last time you said that your experience with the session changed the way you understand pastoral leadership. We found ourselves thinking about that afterward. Would you tell us more?"

Or:

"You told us about a ministry that eventually failed. You said you would approach it differently now. What would you do differently?"

Or:

"You mentioned that your understanding of mission changed significantly in your last call. What caused that change?"

Something we want to return to:

Why:

Our question:

Returning to something a candidate said communicates that you were listening.

7. Explore What Was Missing

Review the first interview.

What important area did you simply not reach?

☐ Preaching

☐ Worship

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Leadership

☐ Shared leadership

☐ Staff relationships

☐ Mission

☐ Community engagement

☐ Differences

☐ Change

☐ Theology

☐ Spiritual formation

☐ Administration

☐ Stewardship

☐ Boundaries and sustainability

☐ Other: _____

Did we actually ask about it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If not, do not interpret its absence. Ask now.

What do we want to understand?

Our question:

Use **FM 4.4 — Interview Question Bank** if helpful.

---

8. Decide Whether a Scenario Would Help

A second interview can be a good place for a ministry scenario.

Use **FM 4.3 — Ministry Scenario Builder**.

Do not include a scenario simply to make the interview seem more rigorous.

Use one only when watching the candidate think through a situation would help you understand something important.

What are we trying to understand?

Would a scenario help?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

Scenario:

Opening question:

“How would you begin approaching this situation?”

What will we listen for?

☐ Questions the candidate asks.

☐ People they want to involve.

☐ Information they seek.

☐ Values they identify.

☐ How they understand pastoral authority.

☐ How they respond to new information.

☐ Whether their thinking changes.

☐ Other: _____

Do not score the answer. Listen to the process.

---

9. Consider a Role Play

Some areas of ministry are relational enough that a brief role play may help.

Possible situations include:

- receiving criticism
- talking with a frustrated church member
- responding to an anxious leader
- navigating a staff conversation
- helping someone think through a disagreement
- responding when someone demands immediate action

Use role play carefully. The goal is not theatrical performance.

It is to experience something of how the candidate listens, responds, asks questions, and relates when a conversation becomes less predictable.

Would a role play genuinely help our discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What are we trying to understand?

Situation:

Who will participate?

How will we introduce it so the candidate understands its purpose?

If you cannot explain clearly what you hope to learn, do not use the role play.

10. Explore Possible Partnership

The second interview should begin moving beyond:

Who is this candidate?

toward:

What might ministry together look like?

Consider questions such as:

“Where are you beginning to see connections between your vocation and what you have learned about our congregation?”

“What about our congregation is giving you energy?”

“What gives you pause?”

“Where do you imagine you might stretch us?”

“Where do you imagine we might stretch you?”

“What possibilities for shared ministry are you beginning to imagine?”

A partnership question we want to ask:

Do not ask the candidate to create a vision for a congregation they still barely know. Explore emerging connections instead.

---

11. Give the Candidate More of the Congregation

Mutual discernment requires increasing transparency.

Ask:

What does the candidate know about us now?

What do they still need to understand?

Is there anything difficult we have not yet discussed?

Is there anything we may have presented too positively or incompletely?

What should we make certain the candidate knows before the process goes further?

The deeper the relationship becomes, the less appropriate it is to present only the congregation's best side.

---

12. Prepare for the Candidate's Questions

The candidate's questions should become more specific as discernment deepens.

They may ask about:

- congregational culture
- leadership
- staff
- finances
- expectations
- community
- worship
- theological diversity
- decision-making
- previous pastoral relationships
- unresolved difficulties
- housing or relocation
- denominational relationships
- terms of call
- family considerations
- the congregation's hopes for the next pastor

Questions we think the candidate may ask:

Questions we hope the candidate will ask:

Questions we may find difficult to answer:

Do not prepare polished answers. Prepare to tell the truth.

---

13. Ask What Gives the Candidate Pause

By a second interview, the candidate should be allowed to name concerns.

Consider asking directly:

“What have you learned about us that gives you pause?”

Then do something difficult: do not defend the congregation. Listen.

Ask:

“Tell us more.”

Who will ask this question?

How will we remind ourselves to listen rather than explain?

An honest concern from a candidate is useful information.

Do not teach candidates that honesty will be punished.

---

14. Ask What the Candidate Needs From You

Consider:

“What do you need to understand about us before deciding whether you want this conversation to continue?”

Or:

“What information would help your discernment at this point?”

Information the candidate requests:

Who will provide it?

By when?

---

15. Plan the Flow

A second interview may reasonably be longer than the first.

For a **75–90 minute conversation**, consider:

Conversation	Approximate Time
Welcome and reconnection	5 minutes
What has stayed with us?	10 minutes
Two deeper conversations	20–25 minutes
Scenario or additional conversation	15–20 minutes
Possible partnership	10 minutes
Candidate questions	20 minutes
Next steps and closing	5 minutes

Our planned length:

Candidate questions will begin no later than:

Protect that time. The candidate may now have more important questions than the committee does.

---

16. Assign Responsibilities

Use **FM 3.3 — Interview Responsibilities Checklist**.

Primary Host

Prayer Leader

Timekeeper

Primary Note Keeper

Conversation One begins with:

Conversation Two begins with:

Scenario begins with:

Candidate questions transition:

Closing:

Assign responsibilities, not a sequence of questions.

17. Plan the Closing Question

Consider ending the substantive conversation with something appropriate to deeper discernment:

“What are you noticing now about the possibility of ministry with us?”

Or:

“What questions are you carrying away from this conversation?”

Or:

“What do you think we should be talking about next?”

Our closing question:

Then explain clearly what happens next.

---

18. Decide in Advance What You Will Not Decide

A strong second interview can create excitement.

Do not let the energy of the conversation push the committee into a decision it did not intend to make.

Before the interview:

Are we making a decision immediately afterward?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, what decision are we actually making?

If no, when will we reconvene?

What reflection will happen first?

Do not allow:

“We loved them!”

to substitute for discernment.

And do not allow:

“Something bothered me.”

to end discernment without understanding what it was.

---

19. Final Question Review

Lay your planned questions on the table.

For each one ask:

☐ Why are we asking this?

☐ Does it deepen something from the first interview?

☐ Does it explore an emerging pattern?

☐ Does it address something we genuinely do not know?

☐ Does it invite story or reflection?

☐ Have we already asked this in another form?

☐ Could a follow-up question accomplish more?

☐ Are we prepared for an answer we do not expect?

Now ask:

Which question could we remove?

A second interview should be deeper, not fuller.

---

20. Our Second Interview Plan

What we most need to understand:

Conversation One:

Conversation Two:

Conversation Three:

Scenario or role play, if any:

Partnership question:

Candidate question time begins:

Closing question:

Next communication promised by:

Person responsible:

Immediately After the Interview

Before discussing whether the candidate should continue:

☐ Pause.

☐ Pray.

☐ Complete individual notes.

☐ Return to the patterns you were exploring.

Then ask:

“What became clearer?”

Follow with:

“What became more complicated?”

Then:

“What do we understand now that we did not understand before?”

And finally:

“What do we still need to know?”

Those questions prepare you for the next stage of discernment.

Leader's Note

The second interview should feel different from the first.

The first conversation says:

Tell us who you are.

The second says:

We heard you. We have been thinking about what you told us. Help us understand more.

That difference matters.

Do not reward a promising first interview by starting over with another list of questions.

Return to the story.

Test the patterns.

Explore what remains uncertain.

Allow the candidate to become more curious about you.

Begin asking, carefully and without rushing:

Could our stories belong together for a season of ministry?

Chapter Five — When the Candidate Interviews You

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 5.1

Questions Candidates Commonly Ask

Purpose

At some point in the search, the interview turns around: the candidate begins interviewing you.

That is not simply a courtesy at the end of the committee's questions. It is an essential part of mutual discernment.

Experienced candidates may ask questions that are more difficult than the ones you have prepared for them. They are trying to understand the congregation behind the Ministry Discernment Profile, website, statistics, and stories you have shared.

They may be listening for what gives your congregation life, what causes anxiety, how decisions are really made, what happened with the previous pastor, how differences are handled, and whether the congregation is prepared to become a genuine partner with its next pastor.

You do not need perfect answers. You need honest ones.

Use this guide before interviews to anticipate candidates' questions and identify where the committee needs better information.

---

1. Questions About Who You Are

Candidates often begin with broad questions.

They may ask:

How would you describe this congregation to someone who has never been here?

What do you love about this church?

What are you proud of?

What gives this congregation life?

Why do people stay here?

What makes this congregation different from other churches in the community?

What do you think your congregation values most?

What would members say is most important about this church?

What do you hope never changes?

Could we answer these honestly?

What might different members of the committee answer differently?

Different answers are not necessarily a problem. They may reveal the richness—or complexity—of congregational identity.

---

2. Questions About the Transition

A candidate will want to know what has happened since the previous pastor left.

Expect questions such as:

How long have you been in transition?

What has this transition been like for the congregation?

What have you learned about yourselves during this time?

What has changed since the previous pastor left?

What has been difficult?

What has surprised you?

What work has the congregation done during the transition?

What do you understand about yourselves now that you did not understand when the transition began?

What would we say?

Is there anything about the transition we have been reluctant to discuss?

A candidate should not have to discover the real transition after accepting the call.

---

3. Questions About the Previous Pastor

Candidates may ask directly.

How long was your previous pastor here?

Why did the pastor leave?

What was the relationship between the pastor and congregation like?

What did the previous pastor do particularly well?

What was difficult about that ministry?

What did you learn from that relationship?

What would you hope might be different in the next pastoral relationship?

How has the congregation said goodbye?

Answer these questions without turning the previous pastor into either a saint or a villain.

Avoid:

"Everything was wonderful."

when it was not.

Also avoid using the candidate interview to rehearse old grievances.

A healthier answer may sound like:

"There was much we valued about that ministry, and there were also places where the relationship became difficult. One thing we have been learning during the transition is…"

The important question is not simply what happened, but what the congregation has learned from it.

---

4. Questions About What You Are Looking For

Candidates will want to know what lies behind the words in your profile.

They may ask:

What are you really looking for in your next pastor?

What are the three most important things you need from your next pastor?

What do members expect from the pastor?

What would make someone successful here?

What would make ministry here difficult?

What do you expect the pastor to spend most of their time doing?

What are you hoping the next pastor will change?

What do you hope the next pastor will not change?

Our answers:

Now ask yourselves:

Are these expectations realistic for one pastor?

---

5. Questions About the Congregation's Future

Candidates may want to know whether you are searching primarily for someone to preserve the congregation you have been or help you discover what comes next.

They may ask:

What do you believe God may be calling this congregation toward?

What are you most excited about in the next few years?

What are you most concerned about?

Where do you think the congregation needs to change?

Where is there resistance to change?

What would you attempt if you knew you could not fail?

What possibilities do you see that you have not yet pursued?

What do you hope will be different five years from now?

What can we genuinely say?

Do not manufacture a vision because you think a candidate expects one.

It is entirely legitimate to say:

"We do not know yet. We have begun discerning that question, and we expect our next pastor to join us in that work."

---

6. Questions About Mission and Community

A candidate may ask:

How does this congregation understand its mission?

What relationships does the church have in the community?

Who in the community knows this congregation?

What would your neighbors say about the church?

Who uses your building besides the congregation?

What community needs are you paying attention to?

What partnerships do you have beyond the church?

How do members participate in ministry outside the congregation?

What have you learned from your community?

Where do you see God already at work around you?

Strong relationships we can describe:

Areas where our answer is thinner than we would like:

A candidate may learn as much from where you struggle to answer as from where you answer easily.

7. Questions About Worship

Expect questions such as:

How would you describe worship here?

What does the congregation value most about worship?

How open is the congregation to changes in worship?

What role does music play?

Who plans worship?

How involved are laypeople?

What are the expectations around preaching?

How long do sermons usually run?

How are the sacraments celebrated?

What worship traditions would be difficult to change?

What should the candidate understand?

Do not describe the worship you wish you had. Describe the worship the candidate will actually encounter.

8. Questions About Pastoral Care

Candidates may ask:

What does the congregation expect from the pastor in pastoral care?

Who currently provides pastoral care?

Does the congregation expect the pastor to visit every hospitalized member?

How are homebound members cared for?

What role do elders, deacons, or other caregivers have?

How are emergencies communicated?

What expectations exist around funerals and weddings?

How much of the pastor's time has traditionally been devoted to pastoral care?

Our actual expectations are:

Are those expectations sustainable?

Be especially honest here. Unspoken expectations about pastoral availability can become major sources of difficulty later.

---

9. Questions About Leadership and Decision-Making

Candidates need to understand how authority actually functions.

They may ask:

How are decisions made here?

How does the session or governing body work?

How would you describe the relationship between the pastor and session?

Who are the influential leaders in the congregation?

How are new ideas received?

What happens when the session disagrees?

What happens when the congregation disagrees with the session?

How much authority does the pastor traditionally exercise?

How are difficult decisions communicated?

How are leaders selected?

A particularly perceptive candidate may ask:

"If I wanted to understand how decisions are really made here, what would I need to know?"

Our answer:

If the formal and actual answers differ, the candidate eventually needs to understand both.

10. Questions About Differences

Candidates may ask:

What issues create the greatest differences within the congregation?

How does the congregation handle disagreement?

When was the last significant disagreement?

What happened?

Are there unresolved issues I should know about?

Are there groups within the congregation that tend to see things differently?

How does the session handle strongly differing perspectives?

What happens when someone is angry with the pastor?

What do we need to be prepared to discuss?

Do not say:

“We don't have conflict.”

Every congregation has differences. The more useful question is how those differences are lived.

---

11. Questions About Change

Candidates may ask:

How does this congregation respond to change?

What significant changes have happened recently?

Which changes went well?

Which were difficult?

What has the congregation tried that did not work?

What did you learn from it?

How quickly does this congregation usually make decisions?

What change does everyone know needs to happen but nobody wants to discuss?

That last question may produce silence. Silence is allowed.

Our honest answer might be:

---

12. Questions About Staff

If the congregation has staff, expect detailed questions.

Who is on staff?

How long have they served?

Who supervises whom?

How are staff evaluated?

How are staff meetings conducted?

How are responsibilities divided?

How much authority does the pastor have regarding staff?

Have there been significant staff difficulties?

Are any staff positions likely to change?

How do staff and session relate?

What should I know about the staff before considering this call seriously?

Information we need to provide clearly:

Do not invite a candidate into unresolved staff problems without telling them those problems exist.

13. Questions About Finances

Serious candidates will ask about finances.

They may ask:

What is the congregation's financial condition?

Is the budget balanced?

What have giving patterns been over the last five years?

Are reserves being used to fund operations?

Does the congregation have debt?

Are there significant designated or restricted funds?

What major building expenses are anticipated?

How does the congregation approach stewardship?

How transparent are finances with the congregation?

What financial challenges do you expect during the next several years?

Do we have current answers?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Who can provide accurate financial information?

A candidate considering a call is entitled to understand the congregation's financial health.

14. Questions About Membership and Participation

Candidates may look beyond reported membership.

They may ask:

How many people actually worship on an average Sunday?

How has attendance changed?

How many people participate beyond Sunday worship?

How many children and youth are regularly involved?

What is the age distribution of the congregation?

Are new people joining?

Why do people leave?

Where do new participants usually come from?

How many members carry most of the leadership?

Numbers we should know:

Be accurate. A smaller truthful number is more useful than an impressive number that does not describe congregational life.

---

15. Questions About Children, Youth, and Families

Candidates may ask:

How many children and youth are actually involved?

What ministries currently exist?

Who leads them?

How involved are parents?

How are children included in worship and congregational life?

What expectations will the congregation have of the pastor?

What has been tried in recent years?

What has changed?

Be careful not to turn:

“We need more young families”

into a job description for the next pastor.

---

16. Questions About the Building

Candidates may ask:

What condition are the facilities in?

What major repairs are anticipated?

How much of the budget goes toward the building?

Who uses the facilities during the week?

Are there spaces that are rarely used?

Are there accessibility concerns?

How emotionally attached is the congregation to the building?

Have there been conversations about renovating, sharing, selling, or repurposing space?

What should the candidate know?

Buildings are ministry assets. They can also become significant pastoral responsibilities.

17. Questions About Time and Expectations

Candidates may ask very practical questions:

What does the congregation consider a normal workweek?

What evening commitments are expected?

How many meetings does the pastor typically attend?

What are expectations around office hours?

What constitutes an emergency?

What expectations exist for days off?

How is vacation handled?

What expectations exist when the pastor is away?

How does the congregation protect the pastor's time?

Are our formal expectations and actual expectations the same?

If not, that deserves conversation.

18. Questions About the Wider Church

Candidates may ask:

How does this congregation relate to the presbytery or other denominational body?

Who participates beyond the congregation?

How involved has the pastor traditionally been?

What relationships does the congregation have with neighboring churches?

Are there denominational issues that have been particularly important here?

How does the congregation understand its connection to the wider Church?

What should we tell the candidate?

---

19. Questions About the Community

Candidates considering relocation may ask:

What is it like to live here?

Where do most members live?

What is changing in the community?

What are the schools like?

What is housing like?

What are the major employers?

What do people do here for recreation?

What are the community's greatest challenges?

What do you love about living here?

Do not become the Chamber of Commerce. Candidates need a realistic picture of the place as well as the congregation.

---

20. Questions About Terms of Call

As discernment becomes serious, candidates will appropriately ask about:

- compensation
- housing or housing allowance
- benefits
- retirement
- continuing education
- professional expenses
- vacation
- parental or family leave
- sabbatical policies
- moving expenses
- review processes
- other denominational requirements

Do not treat these questions as evidence that the candidate "only cares about money." A call has practical dimensions.

Candidates need enough information to determine whether accepting it is possible.

Who is authorized to discuss Terms of Call?

At what stage will that conversation occur?

---

21. Questions About What You Have Not Told Them

A thoughtful candidate may eventually ask:

"What haven't you told me that I need to know before I seriously consider this call?"

Prepare for that question.

Something difficult but important:

Something easily misunderstood:

Something we have been reluctant to discuss:

Something we would regret the candidate discovering only after arriving:

If it would matter after the candidate accepts the call, it probably matters before they accept it.

22. Questions About the Search Committee

Candidates may become curious about you.

They may ask:

How was this committee selected?

How representative are you of the congregation?

Where have committee members disagreed during the search?

What have you learned from one another?

What has changed in your thinking since the search began?

What are you still uncertain about?

What question has been hardest for the committee to answer?

These are excellent questions. Answer them honestly.

23. Questions About the Candidate's First Year

As the possibility of a call becomes more serious, expect questions such as:

What would you expect from me during the first six months?

What would you hope I accomplish during the first year?

What should I not try to change too quickly?

Who would help me learn the congregation?

How would the session and pastor establish priorities together?

How would you help the congregation adjust to a new pastor?

What support would I have during the transition?

What would we say?

Calling a pastor does not end the transition. Pastor and congregation still have to learn how to become partners in ministry.

24. Questions That May Be Difficult to Hear

Prepare especially for questions such as:

Why should I want to come here?

Why did your last pastor leave?

What is unhealthy about this congregation?

Who has too much influence?

What are you afraid of?

Where are you stuck?

What have you avoided dealing with?

What would frustrate me if I became your pastor?

What do you expect the new pastor to fix?

What does this congregation need to repent of?

A candidate may phrase these more gently. Or not.

Do not punish candor. Take a moment, then answer the question you were actually asked.

---

25. Questions You Hope the Candidate Asks

Before an interview, complete this section.

I hope the candidate asks us about:

Because:

I hope the candidate becomes curious about:

Because:

A question that would tell me the candidate has really been listening to us:

This exercise may reveal what the committee most hopes to share.

---

26. Questions We Hope They Do Not Ask

Now complete the harder section.

I hope the candidate does not ask:

Because:

Another question I would find difficult:

Because:

Now ask:

Why is this question difficult for us?

This may be the most useful preparation on the worksheet.

The question you hope the candidate does not ask may point directly to something the committee needs to discuss before the next interview.

---

27. Who Can Answer What?

Do not assume every committee member should answer every question.

Candidate Asks About	Best Person to Respond
Transition history	_____
Worship	_____
Pastoral care expectations	_____

Candidate Asks About	Best Person to Respond
Session/governance	_____
Mission/community	_____
Staff	_____
Finances	_____
Terms of Call	_____
Building	_____
Community	_____
Other: _____	_____

When someone else knows more, let them answer.

When nobody knows, say:

“We don't know, but we will find out.”

Then make certain someone does.

---

28. Practice Saying These Sentences

A healthy search committee should be comfortable saying:

“We don't know.”

“We see that differently.”

“We are still working on that.”

“That has been difficult for us.”

“We made a mistake.”

“We haven't talked about that enough.”

“That's a good question. We need to find out.”

“We aren't ready to answer that yet.”

“Let us tell you what we have learned.”

These are not weak answers. They are often signs that the candidate is meeting a real congregation rather than a search committee presentation.

---

29. Before the Candidate Interviews You

Ask:

☐ Do we know the basic facts about our congregation?

☐ Can we describe our transition honestly?

☐ Can we talk about the previous pastor fairly?

☐ Can we name our strengths without selling ourselves?

☐ Can we name our difficulties without blaming people?

☐ Can we describe how decisions are actually made?

☐ Can we talk honestly about finances?

☐ Can we name unrealistic expectations if they exist?

☐ Can we admit where we disagree?

☐ Can we say what we do not know?

☐ Can we hear criticism or concern without becoming defensive?

☐ Are we prepared for the candidate to decide that we are not the right congregation?

That last question matters.

Mutual discernment is only mutual when either party is genuinely free to say no.

Leader's Note

Search committees sometimes prepare extensively for the questions they will ask candidates and barely prepare for the questions candidates will ask them. That imbalance matters.

You are not interviewing someone who is waiting to be chosen. You are meeting another participant in discernment.

The candidate is trying to determine whether this congregation is a place where they can faithfully offer their gifts, grow as a pastor, sustain a life, form healthy relationships, and join a ministry worth giving themselves to.

Some of their questions may make you proud.

Some may expose places where you have work to do.

Some may reveal differences within the committee.

Some may make you uncomfortable.

Good. Answer as the congregation you actually are. Do not sell the church. Let the candidate meet i

FM 5.2

Preparing Your Responses

Purpose

Preparing to answer a candidate's questions does not mean preparing polished answers.

It means knowing your congregation well enough to respond truthfully.

A search committee can become so practiced at presenting the congregation that its answers begin to sound like advertising: difficulties are softened, differences disappear, and aspirations are described as present reality.

That does not serve mutual discernment.

Candidates need to meet the congregation you actually are—not simply the congregation described in your Ministry Discernment Profile.

Use this worksheet with **FM 5.1 — Questions Candidates Commonly Ask** to identify questions you should be prepared to answer, clarify what you actually know, and recognize where the committee needs additional information or greater honesty.

The goal is not:

How can we give the best answer?

It is:

How can we give the truest answer?

---

1. Begin With the Congregation You Actually Are

Before preparing specific responses, complete these sentences individually.

Something I deeply value about this congregation is:

Something I believe we do particularly well is:

Something we are still learning is:

Something that is difficult for us is:

Something about us that a new pastor might find surprising is:

Something I hope our next pastor will come to love about us is:

Now compare your responses.

Where do committee members see the congregation similarly?

Where do you see it differently?

Both may belong in the story.

2. Separate Who We Are From Who We Hope to Become

Search committees often describe aspirations as though they were current realities.

For example:

“We are a congregation deeply engaged with our community.”

Perhaps.

Or perhaps community engagement is something the congregation deeply desires.

Those are different truths.

Complete both columns.

We Are	We Hope to Become

Both columns can be attractive to the right candidate.

A congregation does not need to have arrived in order to be worth joining.

---

3. Identify the Questions We Need to Prepare For

Return to **FM 5.1 — Questions Candidates Commonly Ask**.

Choose the questions you believe a serious candidate is most likely to ask.

Question:

Why might a candidate ask this?

What do we know?

What do we not know?

Who could help us answer accurately?

Question:

Why might a candidate ask this?

What do we know?

What do we not know?

Who could help us answer accurately?

Question:

Why might a candidate ask this?

What do we know?

What do we not know?

Who could help us answer accurately?

---

4. Prepare Facts, Not Scripts

Some candidate questions require factual answers.

Make certain you know them.

Current average worship attendance:

Membership:

Number of children/youth regularly participating:

Current annual budget:

Current financial position:

Debt, if any:

Significant reserves or endowments:

Staff positions:

Major anticipated building expenses:

Length of previous pastorate:

Date previous pastor left:

Current pastoral leadership:

Length of transition:

Other facts candidates should know:

Do not memorize a presentation.

Know the information.

---

5. Check the Profile Against Reality

Return to your Ministry Discernment Profile.

Choose several important statements.

Our profile says:

Is this accurate now?

☐ Yes

☐ Mostly

☐ Not anymore

☐ It is more aspiration than current reality

What would we tell a candidate if they asked about it?

Our profile says:

Is this accurate now?

☐ Yes

☐ Mostly

☐ Not anymore

☐ It is more aspiration than current reality

What would we tell a candidate?

If circumstances have changed since the profile was written, say so.

The profile begins the conversation.

It does not freeze the congregation in time.

---

6. Prepare to Talk About the Transition

A candidate may reasonably want to understand what happened before they arrived.

Why did the previous pastor leave?

What was healthy about that pastoral relationship?

What was difficult?

How did the congregation respond to the ending?

What has the congregation learned during the transition?

What remains unfinished?

What might a new pastor encounter because of this history?

Your answer should neither protect the congregation from its history nor make the candidate responsible for repairing it.

7. Prepare to Talk About Your Strengths

Candidates should hear what gives the congregation life.

Three strengths we would name:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now ask:

What evidence do we have?

A story that illustrates strength #1:

A story that illustrates strength #2:

A story that illustrates strength #3:

Stories are more useful than adjectives.

Instead of:

“We are very welcoming.”

tell the candidate about a time when the congregation practiced hospitality.

Instead of:

“Mission is important to us.”

describe a relationship or ministry that demonstrates it.

---

8. Prepare to Talk About Your Difficulties

Every congregation has difficulties.

Something that is difficult for us:

How long has this been difficult?

What have we done about it?

What have we learned?

What responsibility has the congregation taken?

What are we still avoiding?

Now ask:

Are we secretly expecting the next pastor to solve this?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Perhaps

If yes, that deserves committee conversation before it becomes an unspoken term of call.

---

9. Prepare to Talk About Differences

Do not tell a candidate:

"We all get along."

Tell them how you live when you do not.

What issues create significant differences among us?

How are differences usually expressed?

What happens when someone strongly disagrees with leadership?

How does the session handle disagreement?

What have we learned from our most recent significant disagreement?

Is anything unresolved?

The candidate does not need a congregation without differences.

They need to know what kind of congregation they will be entering.

10. Prepare to Talk About Decision-Making

The candidate may ask:

“How are decisions made here?”

Do not answer only from the bylaws or Book of Order.

Describe reality.

Formally, decisions are made by:

In practice, influential voices include:

Before a major decision, people usually:

When leaders disagree:

When the congregation disagrees with leadership:

Something a new pastor would need to understand about how decisions really happen here:

Informal authority exists in every organization.

Pretending otherwise does not eliminate it.

11. Prepare to Talk About Expectations

Complete this sentence individually:

“A good pastor here will…”

Compare responses.

Then ask:

Which expectations are clearly part of the call?

Which are preferences?

Which are inherited from previous pastors?

Which may be unrealistic?

Which have never actually been discussed by the congregation?

A candidate should not have to discover the real job description six months after arriving.

12. Prepare to Talk About Pastoral Care

What does the congregation expect from the pastor?

What pastoral care is shared by others?

What happens when someone is hospitalized?

What happens during an emergency?

Who visits homebound members?

What are expectations around funerals?

Are members accustomed to direct access to the pastor at all times?

Are our expectations sustainable?

Be especially careful here.

Pastoral care expectations are often deeply held and poorly articulated.

13. Prepare to Talk About Worship

What does the congregation most value about worship?

What traditions matter deeply?

What has changed recently?

How were those changes received?

How much freedom would a new pastor reasonably have?

Where would change require considerable conversation?

What are our expectations around preaching?

Describe the worshiping congregation the candidate would actually encounter.

---

14. Prepare to Talk About Mission

What ministries matter most to us?

Which are primarily programs?

Which are built around relationships?

Who in the community are our partners?

What community needs are we paying attention to?

What have we learned from people outside our congregation?

Where do we believe God may be inviting us next?

If you do not know, say:

“We are still discerning that.”

That may be a more promising answer than pretending the future has already been decided.

15. Prepare to Talk About Finances

Candidates should not have to guess about financial reality.

Is the current operating budget balanced?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are reserves being used for operations?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Giving trend:

☐ Increasing

☐ Stable

☐ Declining

☐ We need better information

Significant debt:

Significant reserves/endowments:

Deferred maintenance or major anticipated expenses:

Financial concern a candidate should know:

Who can provide detailed financial information?

Financial transparency belongs to mutual discernment.

16. Prepare to Talk About Staff

Current staff:

Reporting relationships:

Staff strengths:

Existing difficulties:

Changes likely during the next year:

Authority the new pastor will have:

Something about staff relationships the candidate needs to understand:

Do not recruit a pastor into a personnel problem and reveal it only after arrival.

17. Prepare to Talk About the Building

Major strengths of our facilities:

Major limitations:

Deferred maintenance:

Accessibility concerns:

Major anticipated expenses:

Community use of the building:

Conversations about future use:

The candidate is not simply considering a congregation.

They may also be inheriting responsibility for a significant physical plant.

---

18. Prepare to Talk About the Community

What do we love about this community?

What is changing?

What challenges does the community face?

Who are our neighbors?

What might surprise someone moving here?

What do we still not understand well about our community?

Describe the place honestly.

Do not become its tourism office.

---

19. Prepare to Talk About the First Year

A serious candidate may ask:

“What would you expect from me during my first year?”

Before answering, ask yourselves what a healthy first year should actually accomplish.

During the first three months, we hope the pastor will:

During the first six months:

By the end of the first year:

Now ask:

Are these expectations primarily about accomplishment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have we allowed enough space for:

☐ Listening?

☐ Relationship building?

☐ Learning congregational culture?

☐ Learning the community?

☐ Building trust?

☐ Establishing healthy working relationships?

☐ Shared discernment?

The first year is not primarily a probationary period.

It is the beginning of partnership.

---

20. Prepare to Say What You Do Not Know

Create a list now.

Questions we may not be able to answer:

For each, identify someone who may know.

Question	Who Can Help?

Then practice saying:

“I don't know.”

Followed by:

“But we can find out.”

Do not improvise because silence feels uncomfortable.

---

21. Prepare to Disagree in Front of the Candidate

A candidate asks:

“How open is the congregation to changing worship?”

One committee member says:

“Very open.”

Another says:

“I'm not sure I would say that.”

Do not panic.

Do not immediately force consensus.

The second person might say:

“I think we may see that differently. My experience has been…”

Then another member can add:

“That's probably worth hearing because both experiences are part of our congregation.”

The candidate has just learned something real.

An area where our committee sees the congregation differently:

_____

_____

Could we allow that difference to be visible?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Why or why not?

_____

22. Prepare Not to Defend

Some candidate questions may feel critical.

Suppose the candidate asks:

“Your profile says community engagement is important, but I don't see many community partnerships listed. Can you help me understand that?”

The temptation is to defend the profile.

Instead:

Listen to the question.

Then answer it.

Perhaps:

“That's a fair observation. Community engagement is important to us, but we are not as deeply connected as we would like to be. That is one of the places where our aspiration is ahead of our practice.”

That answer may tell the candidate more about the congregation's capacity for honest partnership than a list of programs would.

23. Prepare for the Question You Hope They Do Not Ask

Return to **FM 5.1**.

The question I most hope the candidate does not ask is:

Why does that question make me uncomfortable?

What is the truthful answer?

Is there something the committee needs to discuss before we can answer it?

Does the candidate need to know this before the process goes further?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ We need to determine that

Pay particular attention here.

The question you most hope they avoid may point toward the information they most need.

---

24. Prepare for “Why Should I Come Here?”

A candidate may not ask it so directly.

But they are discerning it.

Do not answer with a sales pitch.

Instead ask:

What do we believe is worth joining here?

What ministry gives us life?

What possibility excites us?

Where do we need a partner rather than a rescuer?

What might a pastor genuinely receive from serving with us?

A call should offer vocation in both directions.

---

25. Prepare the Questions You Should Ask Back

Sometimes the candidate's question deserves a response and then curiosity.

Candidate:

“How open is the congregation to change?”

After answering, you might ask:

“What kinds of change are you wondering about?”

Candidate:

“How much pastoral care does the congregation expect?”

After answering:

“What helps you establish healthy pastoral care relationships?”

Candidate:

“What would you expect during my first year?”

After answering:

“What would you hope to learn during your first year?”

Do not turn every candidate question back on them.

But remember:

Their questions can open conversations too.

---

26. Response Preparation Worksheet

Use one copy for any question that deserves careful preparation.

Candidate may ask:

What are they probably trying to understand?

Facts we know:

Our experience:

Where committee members see this differently:

What is difficult to say?

What would an honest response need to include?

Information we need before answering:

Person responsible for finding it:

By when:

27. Final Preparation

Before the interview, ask:

☐ Are we prepared to describe who we actually are?

☐ Can we distinguish reality from aspiration?

☐ Do we know the basic facts?

☐ Can we talk honestly about the transition?

☐ Can we discuss the previous pastor fairly?

☐ Can we name our strengths without exaggerating them?

☐ Can we name our difficulties without blaming someone?

☐ Can we describe how decisions actually happen?

☐ Can we acknowledge differences among ourselves?

☐ Can we discuss finances openly?

☐ Can we identify unrealistic expectations?

☐ Can we say “I don't know”?

☐ Can we receive a difficult question without becoming defensive?

☐ Can we allow the candidate to see something imperfect?

☐ Can we trust that honesty serves discernment better than persuasion?

Before the Candidate Arrives

Do not rehearse your answers again.

Instead, remind one another:

We are not here to persuade this candidate to want us.

We are here to discover whether God may be bringing our stories together.

That requires the candidate to meet the real congregation.

Leader's Note

There is an irony in pastoral searches.

Committees often ask candidates to be vulnerable, reflective, self-aware, and honest about their failures, while presenting the congregation as though it has none.

That is not mutual discernment.

If you want to know how a candidate responds to difficulty, tell them something about yours.

If you want to know whether a candidate can learn from mistakes, be willing to name one of your own.

If you want the candidate to tell you what gives them pause, create a relationship in which telling the truth feels safe.

You do not need to make your congregation look attractive.

You need to make it visible.

The right candidate does not need a perfect congregation.

They need enough truth to discern whether this is a congregation with whom they can faithfully share ministry.

Prepare the facts.

Know your story.

Then answer the question you are actually asked.

FM 5.3

Telling Your Congregation's Story

Purpose

Candidates do not need another brochure.

They need a story.

By this point in the search, they have probably read your Ministry Discernment Profile, visited your website, looked at worship services, and learned the basic facts about your congregation.

Now they are trying to understand something deeper:

Who are these people?

A congregation's story includes more than accomplishments: memory, change, grief, hope, mistakes, relationships, turning points, and the places where God has been faithful.

This worksheet helps your committee practice telling that story honestly and naturally.

The goal is not to memorize a presentation.

The goal is to know your congregation well enough that you can speak about it truthfully.

---

1. Begin With the Story You Usually Tell

Complete this sentence:

"When people ask what our church is like, we usually say…"

_____

_____

_____

Now ask:

What part of that is deeply true?

_____

_____

What part is incomplete?

What part sounds more like aspiration than present reality?

2. Tell the Story in Five Moments

Choose five moments that help explain who your congregation has become.

They may include:

- founding
- growth
- decline
- relocation
- merger
- building decisions
- significant pastors
- major mission commitments
- conflict
- loss
- community change
- new ministries
- moments of renewal

Moment One

What happened?

Why did it matter?

What did it shape in us?

Moment Two

What happened?

Why did it matter?

What did it shape in us?

Moment Three

What happened?

Why did it matter?

What did it shape in us?

Moment Four

What happened?

Why did it matter?

What did it shape in us?

Moment Five

What happened?

Why did it matter?

What did it shape in us?

---

3. Tell the Story of What Gives You Life

Candidates need to know what the congregation enjoys, values, and celebrates.

A ministry that gives us life:

A tradition people treasure:

A relationship we are grateful for:

A moment of joy we remember:

Something we do well together:

A story that captures our congregation at its best:

---

4. Tell the Story of Difficulty

Healthy congregations do not hide their difficult chapters.

Choose one or two experiences that shaped the congregation.

A difficult season:

What happened?

How did people respond?

What did we learn?

What remains unfinished?

Do not use this exercise to assign blame.

Use it to tell the truth.

5. Tell the Story of Change

A significant change we navigated:

What made it difficult?

What helped?

Who helped lead?

What resistance emerged?

What did we learn about ourselves?

What would we do differently now?

Candidates are often less interested in whether change was smooth than in what the congregation learned through it.

---

6. Tell the Story of Mission

A ministry that matters deeply to us:

How did it begin?

Who became involved?

What need or opportunity did we notice?

How did the ministry change us?

What relationships grew from it?

What does this story reveal about our understanding of mission?

---

7. Tell the Story of Your Community

Your congregation does not exist by itself.

Our community is changing in these ways:

A community strength we value:

A community challenge we see:

A relationship beyond the church that matters:

Something our community has taught us:

Something we still do not understand well:

Candidates are discerning a place to love, not simply a church to serve.

---

8. Tell the Story of the Transition

When this transition began, we thought:

Since then, we have learned:

Something we have had to release:

Something we have rediscovered:

Something that surprised us:

Something we still need to work through:

Something that gives us hope now:

This part of the story matters especially.

The candidate needs to understand not only where you have been, but what this transition has done to you.

---

9. Tell the Story of the Previous Pastoral Relationship

Speak with respect and honesty.

Something we valued:

Something that was difficult:

Something we learned:

Something we hope to carry forward:

Something we hope to do differently:

Something we do not want to repeat:

Do not reduce a pastoral relationship to success or failure.

Tell what it taught the congregation.

---

10. Tell the Story of Who Leads

Formal leaders include:

Informal leaders include:

People listen especially to:

New leaders usually emerge by:

Younger or newer members are included by:

A leadership strength we have:

A leadership challenge we have:

A candidate needs to understand both formal structure and lived culture.

---

11. Tell the Story of How You Decide

A recent important decision:

Who participated?

How was it made?

Was there disagreement?

How was disagreement handled?

What happened afterward?

What does this story reveal about how we make decisions?

This often reveals more than simply describing committee structure.

12. Tell the Story of Your Theology

Do not begin with labels.

Begin with lived experience.

A biblical theme we return to:

A theological conviction we hear often:

A way grace becomes visible here:

A difficult theological conversation we have had:

Something we have learned about living with difference:

If someone worshiped with us for six months, they would probably discover:

This connects naturally with **FM 6 — Talking Honestly About Your Theology**.

---

13. Tell the Story of What You Are Becoming

A congregation's story is not only about the past.

We are becoming more:

We are trying to become less:

We are learning to:

We are still resisting:

We are becoming curious about:

We believe God may be inviting us toward:

You do not need certainty.

You do need honesty about direction.

14. Tell the Story Through People

Stories become real through people.

Without violating anyone's privacy, identify:

A person who represents the congregation at its best:

What about them tells our story?

Someone whose leadership changed us:

What did they contribute?

Someone outside the congregation who has shaped us:

What did we learn from them?

These stories help candidates see a living community rather than an institution.

15. Tell the Story Through Place

A place in the church building that carries meaning:

Why?

A place in the community that matters to us:

Why?

A place where we believe ministry could grow:

Why?

Place is part of congregational identity.

---

16. Tell the Story Through Memory

Complete these sentences:

“People here still remember when…”

“One story we tell often is…”

“A phrase you hear around here is…”

“Something people miss is…”

“Something people are proud of is…”

Repeated stories reveal what a congregation believes about itself.

---

17. Tell the Story Through Hope

We hope our next chapter includes:

We hope our next pastor will discover:

We hope the congregation will learn:

We hope our community experiences:

We hope to become:

Do not make the pastor responsible for fulfilling all of these hopes.

They belong to the shared ministry.

---

18. What Would We Never Put in the Brochure?

Complete honestly:

Something true about us that would probably not appear in a promotional piece:

Something a new pastor will eventually discover:

Something we should probably tell them before they have to discover it:

This may be one of the worksheet's most important sections.

---

19. Build a Three-Minute Story

Imagine the candidate asks:

"Tell me who this congregation really is."

Try answering in three minutes.

Do not list programs.

Do not read the profile.

Tell a story.

Use this simple movement:

We have been…

We have learned…

We are becoming…

We are hoping…

And right now we believe God may be inviting us to…

Now say it aloud.

Does it sound like your congregation?

Or does it sound like institutional language?

Revise until it sounds like people talking about a community they know and love.

---

20. Test the Story

Ask:

☐ Does it include both joy and difficulty?

☐ Does it sound like us?

☐ Is it concrete?

☐ Does it include people and relationships?

☐ Does it include the community beyond the church?

☐ Does it acknowledge change?

☐ Does it tell what we have learned?

☐ Does it distinguish reality from aspiration?

☐ Does it leave room for the future?

☐ Would most members recognize this congregation in the story?

If not, keep working.

---

21. Practice Without Memorizing

Invite different committee members to answer:

“Tell me about your church.”

Listen.

Do not correct each other immediately.

Then ask:

What appeared in several answers?

What did only one person mention?

What was missing?

What differences surprised us?

What does that teach us about our congregation?

The goal is not one approved script.

The goal is shared understanding.

---

22. The Candidate's Version of the Story

As conversations deepen, ask the candidate:

"What story about us are you beginning to hear?"

Then listen.

What did the candidate notice?

What did they misunderstand?

What did they see that we had not noticed?

What question did their answer awaken?

A candidate's perception of your story becomes part of mutual discernment.

Leader's Note

A congregation's story is not its résumé.

It is not:

Founded in 1892. Built sanctuary in 1957. Added education wing in 1984. Average attendance 143.

Those facts may matter.

But the story lies underneath them.

Why did people build?

What did they risk?

What did they lose?

What did they learn?

Who shaped them?

What has God been doing among them?

What are they grieving?

What are they becoming?

What are they beginning to imagine?

Tell that story.

Do not polish it until all the rough edges disappear.

The candidate is not trying to decide whether your congregation is impressive.

They are trying to discern whether they can love it.

Give them something real enough to love.

FM 5.4

Speaking Honestly About Strengths and Challenges

Purpose

Every congregation has strengths.

Every congregation has challenges.

Mutual discernment requires the courage to talk honestly about both.

Search committees sometimes fear that naming a difficulty will discourage a candidate. That fear can lead them to emphasize strengths, soften problems, or describe aspirations as though they were already reality.

But candidates do not need a perfect congregation.

They need a truthful one.

This worksheet will help your committee identify the strengths that genuinely give your congregation life, the challenges that require attention, and the difference between a challenge the congregation owns and a problem it is quietly expecting the next pastor to solve.

The goal is not to make the congregation look better.

It is to make the congregation more visible.

---

1. Name the Strengths You Can Actually See

Begin with evidence.

A strength we believe our congregation possesses:

What makes us say that?

A story that illustrates it:

Who else in the congregation would recognize this strength?

How does this strength contribute to ministry?

Another strength:

What makes us say that?

A story that illustrates it:

How does this strength contribute to ministry?

Another strength:

What makes us say that?

A story that illustrates it:

2. Test the Adjectives

Congregations often describe themselves with words such as:

Welcoming

Friendly

Mission-minded

Generous

Faithful

Flexible

Caring

Inclusive

Traditional

Innovative

Close-knit

These words may be true.

But ask:

What would a candidate actually experience that would make this word visible?

We say we are:

A candidate would see that when:

We say we are:

A candidate would see that when:

If you cannot describe the behavior, relationship, or story behind the adjective, the word may be more aspiration than reality.

---

3. Name the Challenges Without Blame

A challenge should be described clearly enough that a candidate understands it without turning a person or group into the problem.

A current challenge is:

How long has this been present?

What contributes to it?

Who is affected?

What has the congregation already tried?

What have we learned?

What remains unresolved?

---

4. Describe the Challenge Without Creating a Villain

Consider the difference.

Instead of:

“Our older members refuse to change.”

Try:

“Some long-time members are deeply attached to traditions that have carried meaning for many years, while newer members are asking questions about how those traditions serve our ministry now. We are still learning how to have that conversation well.”

Instead of:

“Our last pastor caused a lot of conflict.”

Try:

“The previous pastoral relationship became difficult, and trust was strained in several parts of the congregation. During the transition we have been working to understand both what happened and what we need to do differently in future pastoral relationships.”

Instead of:

“Nobody wants to volunteer anymore.”

Try:

“A relatively small group has carried much of the congregation's ministry for a long time, and many are tired. We are beginning to ask how ministry can be shared more broadly and whether some things need to end.”

Now practice.

The way we usually describe the challenge:

_____

_____

A more accurate and less blaming description:

_____

_____

_____

5. Distinguish a Problem From a Developmental Challenge

Some problems require fixing.

Others require growth.

For example:

A leaking roof is a problem.

Learning to make decisions with greater participation is a developmental challenge.

An unfilled staff position is a problem.

Learning how to share ministry rather than expecting the pastor to do everything is a developmental challenge.

Our challenge:

_____

Is it primarily:

☐ A practical problem to solve

☐ A relationship to repair

☐ A pattern to change

☐ A skill to develop

☐ A loss to grieve

☐ A decision to make

☐ A new reality to accept

☐ A question to discern

☐ Other: _____

Understanding the kind of challenge helps you describe it honestly.

---

6. Who Owns the Challenge?

This is one of the search's most important questions.

The challenge is:

Responsibility belongs primarily to:

☐ The congregation

☐ Session or governing body

☐ Staff

☐ Pastor

☐ A ministry team

☐ Denominational leadership

☐ Several of these together

What part belongs to the congregation?

What part might belong to a new pastor?

What part requires partnership?

A candidate should not unknowingly inherit work the congregation has refused to own.

7. Are We Looking for a Partner or a Rescuer?

Complete honestly.

We sometimes talk as though our next pastor will:

Now ask:

Is this realistic?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Partly

What would the congregation have to contribute?

What would success require from leaders other than the pastor?

A healthy call says:

“This is work we hope to do with you.”

Not:

“This is what we need you to fix for us.”

---

8. What Have We Already Done?

Candidates will often want to know whether the congregation has begun addressing its challenges.

We recognized the challenge when:

We have already:

☐ Talked about it openly

☐ Gathered information

☐ Prayed and reflected

☐ Sought outside help

☐ Changed a practice

☐ Made a decision

☐ Tried something new

☐ Apologized or repaired a relationship

☐ Ended something

☐ We have not yet taken action

What happened?

What did we learn?

What still needs to happen?

A congregation that can say:

“We are working on this.”

may be far more attractive than one that claims:

“We do not have problems.”

---

9. What Are We Avoiding?

Some challenges are difficult precisely because nobody wants to name them.

Complete individually first.

Something we rarely talk about openly is:

We avoid it because:

What happens because we avoid it?

Would this matter to a new pastor?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Perhaps

If yes, when should it be discussed?

This question may uncover something important enough that the committee should seek further conversation before interviewing candidates.

---

10. Strengths Can Become Challenges

A strength can become unhealthy when overused.

For example:

Strong relationships can become resistance to newcomers.

Respect for tradition can become inability to change.

Strong lay leadership can become unclear pastoral authority.

Generosity can become avoidance of financial discipline.

Harmony can become avoidance of difficult conversation.

Independence can become reluctance to seek help.

One of our strengths is:

When overused, it can become:

Have we seen that happen?

This is not a reason to distrust your strengths.

It is a reason to understand them more fully.

---

11. Challenges Can Reveal Strengths

Difficult experiences can also reveal gifts.

A challenge we have faced:

Something healthy that emerged:

A strength we discovered:

Something we know now because of that experience:

Candidates need to know not only what has been difficult.

They need to know how the congregation responds when things are difficult.

---

12. Name the Challenge at the Right Depth

Too vague:

“We need to grow.”

More useful:

“Worship attendance has declined by approximately one-third over the last ten years, and we have not developed many new relationships with people under fifty.”

Deeper still:

“We are beginning to recognize that our anxiety about attendance has often led us to ask how to attract people to the church rather than how we might join what God is doing in the community.”

Each level tells more of the truth.

Our surface description:

The facts underneath it:

The deeper question underneath the facts:

That deeper question may be where genuine partnership begins.

---

13. Describe the Strength at the Right Depth

Too vague:

“We are generous.”

More useful:

“Members regularly respond when people in the congregation face emergencies.”

Deeper:

“Generosity is part of how this congregation understands Christian community. When someone has a need, people tend to organize themselves quickly and quietly to respond.”

Our strength:

What people actually do:

What this reveals about our congregation:

---

14. What Might a Candidate Discover That We Have Not Told Them?

Imagine a pastor has been serving the congregation for six months.

They say:

“I wish someone had told me…”

Complete the sentence.

Another:

Another:

Now ask:

Which of these should be discussed before a call is accepted?

This is one of the clearest tests of transparency.

---

15. What Might a Candidate See Differently?

A candidate may interpret something differently from the committee.

For example:

The committee says:

“We value stability.”

The candidate may hear:

“Change will be difficult.”

The committee says:

“We are like a family.”

The candidate may wonder:

“How easy is it for newcomers to become part of the family?”

The committee says:

“We expect the pastor to be very involved.”

The candidate may hear:

“Boundaries may be difficult here.”

Something we describe positively:

A candidate might also hear:

Is that interpretation fair?

What might we need to explain more fully?

16. Practice the Honest Answer

Candidate asks:

“What is your congregation's greatest strength?”

Our response:

Now add a story.

Candidate asks:

“What is your greatest challenge?”

Our response:

Now add:

What have we learned?

What are we doing about it?

Candidate asks:

"What would be difficult for me if I came here?"

Our response:

Candidate asks:

"What are you hoping I would help you with?"

Our response:

Now add:

"And here is what we understand our part to be…"

---

17. Tell Both Sides of the Same Story

Congregational realities are often both strength and challenge.

Complete:

"One thing you should know about us is…"

"The gift in that is…"

“The challenge in that is…”

“What we are learning is…”

For example:

“We have a very strong sense of family. The gift is that people care deeply for one another. The challenge is that people who are new can sometimes feel as though relationships were established long before they arrived. We are becoming more intentional about making room for new relationships.”

That is a congregation a candidate can understand.

---

18. Rank What the Candidate Needs to Know

Not every weakness or difficulty requires discussion during the first interview.

Some do.

Use the following categories.

The candidate needs to know early:

The candidate needs to know before serious mutual discernment continues:

The candidate needs to know before accepting a call:

Information that is private or irrelevant to the call and should not be shared:

Transparency does not mean telling every story.

It means telling the stories necessary for faithful discernment.

---

19. Our Strengths and Challenges Summary

Three strengths we can describe with confidence:

1. _____

Evidence: _____

2. _____

Evidence: _____

3. _____

Evidence: _____

Three challenges we need to describe honestly:

1. _____

What we are doing about it: _____

2. _____

What we are doing about it: _____

3. _____

What we are doing about it: _____

---

20. Test Your Responses

Before talking with a candidate, ask:

☐ Are our strengths supported by stories or evidence?

☐ Are we naming challenges clearly?

☐ Have we avoided blaming individuals?

☐ Are we distinguishing reality from aspiration?

☐ Have we taken responsibility for our part?

☐ Are we expecting the pastor to repair something that belongs to us?

☐ Can we describe what we have learned?

☐ Can we say what remains unfinished?

☐ Would a candidate receive approximately the same story from other leaders?

☐ Would we be comfortable if the candidate repeated our description back to us?

☐ Will the candidate discover something substantially different after arriving?

If the answer to that last question is yes, more honesty is needed now.

Leader's Note

Honesty about challenges does not make a congregation unattractive.

Lack of self-awareness does.

A candidate may hear:

“Our attendance is declining, our volunteers are tired, and we are still learning how to engage our community.”

and think:

“That sounds like ministry I would love to share.”

Another may hear the same thing and recognize:

“That is not where I am called.”

Both responses serve discernment.

The purpose of the search is not to persuade every promising candidate to want your congregation.

It is to allow both congregation and candidate to see enough truth to recognize whether their vocations belong together.

Speak proudly about what is strong.

Speak humbly about what is difficult.

Speak clearly about what you are learning.

And when you describe a challenge, be ready to say:

“This is our work too.”

FM 5.5

Questions to Continue Exploring

Purpose

Some questions should not be answered in a single interview.

As mutual discernment deepens, new questions emerge. Something the candidate says raises another question. Something the committee says causes the candidate to look again at the congregation. A concern becomes clearer. A possibility becomes more interesting. An assumption begins to change.

That is healthy.

The purpose of this worksheet is to help both committee and candidate identify the conversations that still need to happen.

Use it after a first or second interview, before planning the next conversation, or whenever the committee senses that the process is becoming more serious.

The goal is not to accumulate more questions.

It is to identify the questions that now matter most.

---

1. What Has Become Clearer?

Before identifying what remains uncertain, begin with what you now understand more clearly.

About the candidate, we understand more clearly:

About our congregation, we understand more clearly:

About possible partnership, we understand more clearly:

Something that once concerned us but now feels clearer:

Something that once seemed especially promising but now feels more complicated:

2. What Has Become More Important?

Some questions grow in importance as the relationship develops.

A question that now matters more than it did before:

Why?

What have we heard that makes this important?

Who should help us explore it?

3. What Has Become Less Important?

Not every concern or question deserves to follow you through the entire search.

Something we were initially concerned about:

What helped us understand it differently?

Do we still need to explore it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Only if something new emerges

Learning what no longer matters is part of discernment too.

---

4. What Questions About the Candidate Remain?

Review previous interviews and notes.

Vocation and Call

What do we still want to understand?

Leadership

Relationships

Theology

Preaching and Worship

Mission and Community

Pastoral Care

Staff or Shared Leadership

Differences and Change

Boundaries and Sustainability

Something else:

Complete only the sections where there is genuinely something to explore.

5. What Questions About Us Remain?

Mutual discernment also requires the committee to notice what the candidate still needs to understand.

Something the candidate has asked more than once:

Something we answered incompletely:

Something we avoided:

Something we later realized we should have said:

Something the candidate needs to know before the relationship deepens:

6. What Needs Clarification?

Sometimes the issue is not a deep question.

It is simply unclear.

Something the candidate said that we may have misunderstood:

Something we said that the candidate may have misunderstood:

Something in the Pastoral Discernment Profile that deserves clarification:

Something in our Ministry Discernment Profile that deserves clarification:

What question would clarify it?

Clarification is better than interpretation from a distance.

---

7. What Needs a Story?

Some questions remain abstract.

Ask whether a story would help.

We keep hearing:

But we would like to hear an example of:

A possible story question:

For example:

We keep hearing:
"I value shared leadership."

We would like to hear:
A time when someone else changed the direction of a ministry.

Question:

"Tell us about a time when another leader significantly changed or improved an idea you originally brought."

Move from principle toward lived experience.

---

8. What Needs a Scenario?

Some questions are best explored by watching how the candidate thinks.

We want to understand how the candidate approaches:

Would a ministry scenario help?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, use **FM 4.3 — Ministry Scenario Builder**.

A possible scenario area:

Do not use a scenario if a real story would tell you more.

---

9. What Needs Direct Conversation?

Not every important question should be softened into a story or scenario.

Sometimes the committee needs a clear answer.

Examples might include:

- theological positions
- denominational commitments
- expectations around staff supervision
- Terms of Call
- practical availability
- relocation
- pastoral boundaries
- matters directly related to the responsibilities of the position

Something we need to ask directly:

Why it matters:

Our question:

Direct questions are not contrary to good discernment.

Avoiding important questions is.

---

10. What Concern Needs Context?

A concern should not remain vague.

Our concern is:

What specifically caused it?

Is it based on:

☐ Something the candidate said

☐ Something the candidate did

☐ Something missing

☐ A pattern across conversations

☐ An interpretation

☐ An assumption

☐ Something else: _____

Have we discussed it directly with the candidate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If not, what could we ask?

Do not let a concern grow through committee conversation while the candidate remains unaware that it exists.

---

11. What Possibility Deserves More Attention?

Discernment is not only about concerns.

Sometimes something promising deserves deeper exploration.

Something about this candidate that gives us energy:

A possible connection with our congregation:

A ministry possibility we are beginning to imagine:

What conversation would help us understand it more fully?

12. What Are We Beginning to Imagine Together?

As mutual discernment deepens, ask:

Where do the candidate's gifts seem to meet our congregation's vocation?

Where does the candidate seem especially energized by our story?

Where does our congregation seem energized by theirs?

What possibilities are emerging naturally?

What still feels forced or uncertain?

Do not manufacture compatibility.

Notice what is actually emerging.

---

13. What Gives Us Pause About Partnership?

Ask directly.

Something about possible ministry together that gives us pause:

Is this about:

☐ The candidate

☐ Our congregation

☐ The interaction between the two

☐ Practical circumstances

☐ Uncertainty we have not yet explored

What question might help?

A good candidate may not be the right partner for this congregation.

A good congregation may not be the right context for this candidate.

Discernment seeks the relationship, not merely the quality of either party.

14. What Gives the Candidate Pause?

Do not assume you know.

Ask.

Possible questions include:

“What about us still gives you pause?”

“What are you still uncertain about?”

“What would you need to understand before this conversation could become more serious for you?”

“Is there anything you have learned that makes you wonder whether this call would be a good fit?”

The candidate's concerns:

What do we need to clarify?

What should we simply receive rather than defend?

15. Are We Avoiding a Difficult Conversation?

Ask the committee:

What are we hoping will somehow resolve itself without our having to talk about it?

Why are we avoiding it?

Would it matter after a call is accepted?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Probably

If yes, it belongs in discernment now.

Who should begin the conversation?

When?

---

16. Does the Candidate Need More Access?

Sometimes the next question cannot be answered by the Search Team alone.

The candidate may need conversation with:

☐ Staff

☐ Session or governing body members

☐ Ministry leaders

☐ Denominational leaders

☐ Community partners

☐ Other clergy

☐ Financial leaders

☐ Other: _____

What are they trying to understand?

Who could help?

Is this appropriate at this stage and consistent with confidentiality requirements?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ We need guidance

---

17. Do We Need More Information?

Information needed:

Why?

Source:

Who will obtain it?

By when?

Avoid gathering information simply because more information feels safer.

Ask only for what serves discernment.

---

18. Which Questions Belong Now?

Some questions are important but premature.

Place remaining questions into three groups.

Ask Now

Questions important for the next conversation:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Ask Later

Questions that matter if the relationship continues:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Release

Questions we no longer need:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Not every question needs an answer.

---

19. Choose the Three Conversations That Matter Most

If the next interview could include only three substantive conversations, what should they be?

Conversation One

We need to understand:

_____

Because:

_____

Possible opening question:

_____

_____

_____

Conversation Two

We need to understand:

_____

Because:

Possible opening question:

Conversation Three

We need to understand:

Because:

Possible opening question:

These three conversations should shape the next interview, not a fresh list of unrelated questions.

20. Questions the Candidate Should Continue Exploring

Mutual discernment means the candidate should have questions too.

Consider inviting them to continue exploring:

What do you need to know about us?

What do you want to experience rather than simply hear described?

Whom would you like to meet?

What part of our story remains unclear?

What would help you imagine everyday ministry here?

What concern deserves more conversation?

What possibility makes you curious?

What the candidate wants to explore:

How can we help?

21. What Are We Learning About Ourselves?

Candidate conversations often uncover questions the committee did not know it needed to ask.

Something this candidate has helped us recognize about our congregation:

An assumption we have reconsidered:

An expectation we may need to change:

A question we need to answer regardless of whether this candidate continues:

This is part of the gift of mutual discernment.

Not every candidate becomes your pastor.

Every good conversation can teach you something.

---

22. Is Another Conversation Necessary?

Before scheduling another interview, ask:

Do we have meaningful questions left?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Could those questions affect our discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the candidate still have meaningful questions?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we genuinely open to what another conversation might reveal?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If the answer is no, another interview may only delay a decision already becoming clear.

Do not continue conversations merely because ending one is uncomfortable.

---

23. Our Next Conversation

Candidate: _____

The purpose of the next conversation is:

We most need to explore:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Information we need to provide beforehand:

People who should participate:

Candidate questions we need to answer:

Date:

Leader's Note

As discernment deepens, the number of questions should usually decrease.

The questions become more particular.

More relational.

More consequential.

Early in the search you may ask:

“How do you approach shared leadership?”

Later you may ask:

“You have described a strongly collaborative approach to leadership. Our session is accustomed to pastors taking considerable initiative. What questions would you want to explore with us about how those two patterns might meet?”

That is no longer a generic interview question.

It is a question about **this candidate and this congregation**.

That is where mutual discernment is heading.

Do not ask more simply because you can.

Keep asking until both congregation and candidate understand enough to make the next faithful decision.

Chapter Six — Talking Honestly About Your Theology

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 6.1

Describing Our Lived Theology

Purpose

Every congregation has a theology.

It is found in statements of faith, sermons, worship, and denominational traditions.

But theology is also lived.

It appears in what a congregation celebrates and fears, how it uses money, treats people who disagree, welcomes others, responds to suffering, understands its neighbors, and acts when faithfulness becomes costly.

A candidate needs to understand more than the theological positions your congregation claims.

They need to discover:

What does this congregation actually believe deeply enough to live?

This worksheet helps the committee describe the congregation's **lived theology**—the convictions that have taken flesh in its worship, relationships, decisions, practices, and life together.

The goal is not to create a theological statement.

It is to recognize the theology already being practiced among you.

1. Begin With What You Say You Believe

What theological convictions would most members recognize as important to this congregation?

We believe:

We believe:

We believe:

We believe:

Now ask:

Where would someone see these convictions being lived?

The question is not whether the words are correct.
The question is whether they have become visible.

2. Look at Worship

Worship reveals theology.
Think about what happens repeatedly.
What do our prayers say about God?

What do our hymns and music emphasize?

What themes appear regularly in preaching?

What do we confess?

What do we celebrate?

What do we lament?

What place do silence, mystery, wonder, or unanswered questions have?

What does our worship suggest we believe about God?

3. Look at the Lord's Table

How a congregation gathers at the Table may reveal much about how it understands grace, belonging, community, and Christ.

What do we believe is happening at Communion?

Who is welcomed?

What language do we use when people are invited?

What does our practice communicate about grace?

What does the Table say about who we understand ourselves to be?

4. Look at Baptism

What do we say baptism means?

What promises does the congregation make?

How are those promises lived after the baptism is over?

What does our practice of baptism reveal about:

Grace?

Belonging?

Children?

Community?

Discipleship?

5. Look at How You Read Scripture

Saying:

“The Bible is important to us”

does not tell a candidate very much.

Ask instead:

How is Scripture used in worship?

How is Scripture used in decision-making?

How comfortable are we with different interpretations?

What happens when Scripture challenges a long-held assumption?

What happens when faithful people understand a passage differently?

What biblical stories or themes seem especially important here?

What does this reveal about how we understand Scripture?

6. Look at How You Speak About Jesus

Complete these sentences with language you actually hear in the congregation.

Jesus is:

Jesus came to:

Following Jesus means:

The Gospel is:

Salvation means:

Discipleship looks like:

Now ask:

Where do those convictions become visible in congregational life?

7. Look at How You Speak About God

What images of God appear most naturally among you?

☐ Creator
☐ Father
☐ Shepherd
☐ Judge
☐ Redeemer
☐ Friend
☐ Liberator
☐ Sustainer
☐ Mystery
☐ Love
☐ Sovereign

☐ Companion
☐ Other: _____

Which images appear most often?

Which appear rarely?

What might that reveal?

No congregation uses every theological image equally.
The images you return to help shape the faith you live.

8. Look at How You Speak About the Holy Spirit

When do we talk about the Holy Spirit?

How do we recognize the Spirit's activity?

Do we expect God to surprise us?

How do we discern whether something new may be the Spirit's leading?

Can the Spirit be at work beyond our congregation?

Where have we experienced that?

9. Look at How You Understand the Church

Complete:

The Church exists to…

Now ask:

What does our budget suggest the Church exists to do?

What does our calendar suggest?

What does our building use suggest?

What does our volunteer energy suggest?

What do our relationships beyond the congregation suggest?

Are those answers consistent?

Where are they different?

The difference between what a congregation says the Church is for and where it invests itself may reveal an important theological conversation.

10. Look at Mission

When we use the word "mission," we usually mean:

Mission primarily happens:

☐ Inside the church
☐ Through church programs
☐ In the community
☐ Through individual members
☐ Through partnerships

☐ Wherever people join God's work
☐ Other: _____

A story that reveals our theology of mission:

In that story, who was acting?

Where was God?

What did the congregation receive as well as give?

11. Look at How You Treat People Who Disagree

Few things reveal lived theology more clearly.

When people disagree here, we usually:

What do we believe we owe someone with whom we strongly disagree?

Can faithful Christians disagree about important things?

What holds us together when agreement is impossible?

A story that reveals how we have lived with difference:

What does that story reveal about our theology?

12. Look at Who Belongs

Do not answer only from your welcome statement.

Look at lived experience.

Who finds it easy to belong here?

Who might find belonging more difficult?

What does someone need to know, believe, do, or understand to feel fully part of this congregation?

Are there people who participate but remain near the edges?

Who exercises leadership?

What does this reveal about our theology of belonging?

13. Look at Hospitality

A congregation may say:

“Everyone is welcome.”

Ask what happens next.

When someone new arrives:

When someone is different from most of us:

When someone asks a difficult question:

When someone does not know our customs:

When someone's life does not fit our expectations:

What does our practice of hospitality reveal about our understanding of grace?

14. Look at Money

Budgets are theological documents.

Our largest financial commitments are:

What do they suggest we value?

When money becomes tight, what do we protect first?

What gets reduced first?

How do we talk about giving?

How willing are we to spend money for people who are not members?

What does our use of money reveal about our theology?

15. Look at the Building

Buildings reveal theology too.

We understand our building primarily as:

☐ Sacred space
☐ Congregational home
☐ Community resource
☐ Ministry tool
☐ Historical legacy
☐ Financial responsibility
☐ Some combination

Who uses it?

Who does not?

What activities are easy to imagine happening here?

What activities would make us uncomfortable?

What does that reveal about how we understand the relationship between church and community?

16. Look at Pastoral Care

When someone suffers, we believe the church should:

Who provides care?

What role does the pastor have?

What role does the congregation have?

How do we respond when suffering cannot be fixed?

What do our practices reveal about how we understand compassion, presence, healing, and hope?

17. Look at Failure

What happens when someone makes a significant mistake?

We tend to:

Is apology possible?

Is forgiveness possible?

Is accountability possible?

Is restoration possible?

Can leaders admit mistakes?

What does this reveal about what we actually believe about grace?

A congregation may preach grace every Sunday.
Its response to failure reveals how deeply it trusts it.

18. Look at Fear

What makes your congregation anxious?

We become anxious about:

When we are anxious, we tend to:

What do we try to protect?

What becomes harder to trust?

What theological convictions become harder to live?

Fear does not mean a congregation lacks faith.
But anxiety can reveal where faith becomes difficult.

19. Look at Hope

What gives this congregation hope?

What future do we imagine?

What do we believe God can still do among us?

What do we believe God can do without us?

Where are we seeing signs of new life?

Hope reveals theology too.

20. Look at Your Community

What do we believe about people who never attend church?

What do we believe God is doing beyond the Church?

Do we primarily see our community as:

☐ People who need what we have
☐ People we are called to serve
☐ Neighbors
☐ Partners
☐ Teachers
☐ A place where God is already at work
☐ Other: _____

A community relationship that has shaped our faith:

What did we receive from that relationship?

21. Look at Change

When something new is proposed, our first instinct is usually:

What theological convictions help us change?

What theological convictions sometimes make change difficult?

How do we distinguish faithfulness from familiarity?

Tell the story of a time when faith required the congregation to change:

22. Look at What You Remember

What stories does your congregation keep telling?

A story about faithfulness:

A story about sacrifice:

A story about survival:

A story about mission:

A story about a beloved pastor:

A story about a difficult time:

Now ask:

What theological message lies underneath these stories?

Repeated stories often become a congregation's unofficial theology.

23. Look at What You Celebrate

What accomplishments receive attention?

Whose contributions are recognized?

What ministries generate excitement?

What stories make people proud?

What does this reveal about what we believe matters?

24. Look at What You Grieve

What does the congregation miss?

What losses still carry emotion?

What changes have been difficult to accept?

What does the congregation fear losing next?

What do these losses reveal about what we love?

Grief often points toward deeply held values.
Listen respectfully.

25. Where Does Our Theology Become Difficult to Live?

Choose a conviction you genuinely hold.

We believe:

It becomes difficult to live when:

We sometimes respond by:

We are learning:

For example:

We believe everyone is welcome.

But perhaps:

We find it harder when welcoming someone requires us to change how we do something.

That gap is not evidence of hypocrisy.

It is a place for spiritual formation—if the congregation can recognize it.

26. Where Is Our Theology Changing?

Congregations grow theologically.

Something we understand differently than we did ten years ago:

What caused the change?

Who helped us see differently?

Was the change difficult?

What are we still learning?

A candidate needs to know not only what you believe.
They need to know whether your theology is capable of continuing to deepen.

27. What Theological Differences Live Among Us?

Avoid describing the congregation with one theological label when the reality is more diverse.

Within our congregation, people understand differently:

Those differences are usually:

☐ Openly discussed
☐ Quietly accepted
☐ Avoided
☐ Sources of tension
☐ Sources of learning
☐ Different depending on the issue

What holds us together?

What differences would a new pastor need to understand?

28. What Does a Candidate Need to Know?

A theological conviction deeply important to us:

A theological difference present among us:

A place where our practice does not fully match our convictions:

A theological conversation we are still having:

Something we hope our next pastor will help us explore:

Something we do not expect the pastor to decide for us:

29. Describe Our Lived Theology

Now complete these sentences together.

We believe God is:

We believe Jesus Christ calls the Church to:

We believe the Holy Spirit is:

We believe the Church exists to:

We believe our neighbors are:

We believe discipleship means:

We believe grace looks like:

We believe hope means:

Now ask:

Where can each of these be seen in our life together?

If you cannot identify where a conviction becomes visible, keep it as a question rather than claiming it as a description.

30. Tell a Candidate About Your Theology

Imagine the candidate asks:

“How would you describe the theology of this congregation?”

Do not recite a doctrinal statement.

Try:

“You can probably understand our theology best by noticing…”

Then tell a story.

Another story:

And one place where we are still wrestling:

That may tell the candidate far more than a collection of theological labels.

31. Questions We Might Ask the Candidate

After describing your own lived theology, mutual discernment may naturally invite questions such as:

What in what we have described resonates with you?

What makes you curious?

Where do you hear something you would want to explore more deeply?

Where might your theological convictions stretch us?

Where might ours stretch you?

What theological questions would you hope we could explore together?

A conversation we would like to have:

Leader's Note

Theology is not simply what a congregation says about God.

It is what a congregation has learned to trust.

You can hear it in prayers.

See it in budgets.

Experience it at the Table.

Watch it when someone fails.

Notice it when strangers arrive.

Hear it when people disagree.

Discover it in what the congregation grieves and what it hopes.

See it in how people use power.

And find it in the places where convictions become difficult to live.

A candidate does need to know what you believe.

But they also need to know:

What happens here because you believe it?

That is your lived theology.

And that is the theology with which your next pastor will actually minister.

FM 6.2

If Someone Worshiped Here…

Purpose

One of the simplest ways to describe a congregation's theology is to ask:

If someone worshiped with us for three months, what would they discover about what we believe?

This question moves theology out of labels and abstractions.

It asks what a person would actually experience.

What would they hear in sermons and prayers? What would they notice at Communion? How would they experience welcome? What would happen when people disagreed? What ministries would seem to matter? What would the congregation's habits suggest about God, grace, discipleship, mission, and community?

Use this exercise as a committee conversation. Do not try to produce identical answers.

Listen for the themes that appear repeatedly.

1. Begin With the Experience

Imagine someone has worshiped with your congregation every Sunday for three months.

They have no prior knowledge of your church.

They have simply paid attention.

Ask:

What would they notice first?

What would they hear repeatedly?

What might surprise them?

What might confuse them?

2. What Would They Learn About God?

After three months, what would they probably believe your congregation thinks God is like?

They might say:

"These people seem to believe God is…"

What in worship would lead them to that conclusion?

Would they experience God primarily as:

☐ Loving
☐ Holy
☐ Gracious
☐ Sovereign
☐ Near
☐ Mysterious
☐ Just
☐ Merciful
☐ Active in the world
☐ Other: _____

What evidence supports your answer?

3. What Would They Learn About Jesus?

After listening to preaching, prayers, hymns, and worship for three months:

They might say:

"These people seem to believe Jesus…"

Would they hear more about:

☐ Jesus as Savior
☐ Jesus as Teacher
☐ Jesus as Lord
☐ Jesus as Healer
☐ Jesus as Companion

☐ Jesus as Liberator
☐ Jesus as the One who calls us to discipleship
☐ Jesus as the One through whom God reconciles
☐ Other: _____
What stories or practices would make that visible?

4. What Would They Learn About Grace?

Imagine the visitor says:

"I think this church believes grace means…"
How would they finish the sentence?

Would they experience grace through:

☐ Words of assurance
☐ Communion
☐ Welcome
☐ Forgiveness
☐ Pastoral care
☐ Generosity
☐ Acceptance
☐ Second chances
☐ Other: _____
What would make grace believable here?

5. What Would They Learn About Scripture?

Would a visitor conclude that Scripture is:

☐ Central
☐ Frequently referenced
☐ Interpreted carefully
☐ Open to questions
☐ Used to challenge
☐ Used to comfort
☐ Discussed from different perspectives

☐ Mostly heard in worship
☐ Actively studied beyond worship
☐ Other: _____

They might say:

"This congregation seems to believe Scripture…"

What would lead them to that conclusion?

6. What Would They Learn About Worship?

Would worship feel primarily:

☐ Reverent
☐ Joyful
☐ Reflective
☐ Formal
☐ Informal
☐ Participatory
☐ Contemplative
☐ Teaching-centered
☐ Music-centered
☐ Sacramental
☐ Other: _____

What seems to matter most in worship?

What would a visitor probably understand about why worship matters?

7. What Would They Learn at the Table?

If they experienced Communion, what would they learn?

About belonging:

About grace:

About Christ:

About community:

About who is welcome:

Would the invitation to the Table match the congregation's broader practice of welcome?

8. What Would They Learn About Prayer?

Listen to the congregation's prayers.

What do we pray for most often?

Who appears in our prayers?

What concerns rarely appear?

Would a visitor conclude that prayer is mainly about:

☐ Personal needs
☐ Congregational needs
☐ Community concerns
☐ Global concerns
☐ Justice
☐ Healing
☐ Gratitude
☐ Discernment
☐ Other: _____

What theology of prayer would they hear?

9. What Would They Learn About Belonging?

After three months, would they know how to belong?

Who is visibly included?

Who participates in leadership?

Who speaks?

Who serves?

Who might remain invisible?

Would a visitor believe they could belong before they had everything figured out?

What would make them think so?

10. What Would They Learn About Difference?

Suppose they witnessed a class, meeting, or conversation where people disagreed.

What would they observe?

☐ People listen
☐ People interrupt
☐ People avoid disagreement
☐ People become curious
☐ People defend positions
☐ People remain relational
☐ People become anxious
☐ Other: _____

They might conclude:

"This congregation believes unity means…"

Would they discover that agreement is required?

Or that relationship can continue through difference?

11. What Would They Learn About Mission?

After three months, what would they think mission means here?

Mission seems to mean:

Would they notice:

☐ Service projects
☐ Community partnerships
☐ Financial support
☐ Advocacy
☐ Relational ministries
☐ Outreach events
☐ Members serving beyond the church
☐ Other: _____

They might say:

"This congregation seems to believe its neighbors are…"

What would make them say that?

12. What Would They Learn About Money?

If they listened to announcements, stewardship messages, and congregational conversations:

They might conclude that money is:

☐ A spiritual matter
☐ A private matter
☐ A source of anxiety
☐ A tool for ministry
☐ A measure of commitment
☐ Rarely discussed
☐ Other: _____

What would they think the congregation values financially?

What does the budget make visible?

13. What Would They Learn About Leadership?

After watching worship and perhaps attending a meeting:

Who appears to lead?

Is leadership shared?

Does the pastor seem to do most things?

Are lay leaders visible?

Are newer people invited into leadership?

Would a visitor understand how decisions are made?

What theology of leadership would they see?

14. What Would They Learn About Children and Youth?

Would children and youth appear to be:

☐ Central participants
☐ Welcomed but separate
☐ Mainly part of programs
☐ Visible in worship
☐ Given leadership
☐ Mostly absent
☐ Other: _____

What would a child or teenager learn about their place in the church?

15. What Would They Learn About Older Adults?

Would older adults appear to be:

☐ Valued leaders
☐ Primary participants
☐ Recipients of care
☐ Teachers and mentors
☐ Active in mission
☐ Other: _____

What would worship suggest about aging, wisdom, and vocation?

16. What Would They Learn About Suffering?

After hearing pastoral prayers, sermons, announcements, and conversations:

Would suffering be treated as:

☐ Something to fix
☐ Something to endure
☐ Something to accompany
☐ A place where God is present
☐ A mystery
☐ Other: _____

What would they learn about grief?

What would they learn about hope?

17. What Would They Learn About Failure?

Suppose the visitor became aware that something had gone wrong.

A ministry failed.

A leader made a mistake.

A plan did not work.

What would they observe?

☐ Blame
☐ Grace
☐ Accountability
☐ Avoidance
☐ Learning
☐ Repair
☐ Embarrassment
☐ Forgiveness
☐ Other: _____

What would they conclude the congregation believes about failure?

18. What Would They Learn About Change?

If something changed during those three months:

What would they observe?

Would they conclude that change is:

☐ Welcomed
☐ Discerned carefully
☐ Feared
☐ Accepted slowly
☐ Driven by leaders

☐ Shared broadly
☐ Other: _____

What would they think faithfulness means here?

19. What Would They Learn About the Community?

Would the congregation seem aware of the place around it?

What community names, organizations, or concerns would the visitor hear?

Would they hear more about:
☐ The church itself
☐ Members
☐ The neighborhood
☐ The city or town
☐ National concerns
☐ Global concerns
☐ Other: _____

Would they believe God is active beyond the congregation?

What would make that visible?

20. What Would They Learn About the Future?

Would the visitor hear a congregation talking mostly about:

☐ The past
☐ Maintaining the present
☐ Problems
☐ Possibilities
☐ Discernment
☐ Mission
☐ Fear of decline
☐ Hope
☐ Other: _____

They might say:

"This congregation seems to believe its future is…"

What would lead them to that conclusion?

21. What Would They Learn From What Is Missing?

Sometimes absence speaks.

Would the visitor notice little mention of:

☐ Children
☐ Young adults
☐ Older adults
☐ The community
☐ Mission
☐ Justice
☐ Evangelism
☐ Spiritual formation
☐ People unlike most members
☐ The wider Church
☐ The Holy Spirit
☐ Grace
☐ Hope
☐ Other: _____

What might that absence mean?

Do not assume it means the subject is unimportant.

Become curious.

22. Ask the Harder Question

After three months, what might the visitor notice that the congregation itself no longer notices?

What might they wonder about?

What might they find beautiful?

What might they find difficult?

What might they ask you to explain?

23. Write the Visitor's Report

Imagine the visitor writes a paragraph after three months.

Complete:

"After worshiping with this congregation for three months, I think they believe God is…"

"They seem to believe the Church exists to…"

"They practice grace by…"

"They understand belonging as…"

"They understand mission as…"

"When people disagree, they…"

"What gives them hope is…"

"One question I still have is…"

Read the completed report aloud.

Does it sound true?

24. Compare the Visitor's Report With What We Say About Ourselves

Return to **FM 6.1 — Describing Our Lived Theology**.

We say we believe:

A visitor would probably experience:

These are:
☐ Closely aligned
☐ Somewhat aligned
☐ Different in important ways

What might we learn from the difference?

A gap between conviction and practice is not necessarily cause for shame.

It may identify the next place for growth.

25. What Would We Want a Candidate to Experience?

If a candidate worshiped with you for three months, what would you hope they would discover?

We hope they would experience:

We hope they would see:

We hope they would hear:

We hope they would understand:

Now ask:

Would they?

☐ Yes

☐ Sometimes

☐ Not yet

Where "not yet" appears, you may have discovered something important about the congregation you are becoming.

26. Questions This Exercise Raises for Us

Something we discovered:

Something we want to discuss further:

Something we may need to change:

Something we want to preserve:

Something we need to tell a candidate honestly:

Something we hope our next pastor will help us explore:

27. A One-Minute Answer

Imagine a candidate asks:

"What would I learn about your theology if I simply worshiped with you for a few months?"

Do not give a theological lecture.

Answer in one minute.

Our response:

Then ask:

Can we tell a story that shows this?

Leader's Note

Congregations often know more theology than they realize.

They simply do not always use theological vocabulary to describe it.

The theology is already present in the life they share.

A visitor can often recognize it.

They notice what receives attention.

They notice who is welcomed.

They notice what gets prayed for.

They notice whether grace is only preached or also practiced.

They notice whether differences threaten community.

They notice whether the congregation talks mainly about preserving itself or about joining God's work.

They notice what happens when someone fails.

And they notice what gives people hope.

So when a candidate asks:

"What is the theology of this congregation?"
you may not need to begin with a label.

You might begin:

"Come worship with us for a while. Here is what we hope you would discover…"

FM 6.3

Scripture and Spiritual Formation

Purpose

Most congregations will say that Scripture matters.

That answer is true, but it is not very revealing.

A candidate needs to understand how Scripture actually functions in the life of the congregation.

Is Scripture primarily heard in worship? Studied in groups? Used in decision-making? Approached devotionally, historically, theologically, or all three? Are questions welcomed?

What happens when faithful Christians interpret a passage differently? How does Scripture shape prayer, discipleship, mission, and the formation of Christian character?

This worksheet helps your committee describe not only what you believe about Scripture, but how Scripture forms your life together.

The goal is not to produce a doctrinal statement.

It is to describe your practice honestly.

1. Begin With Experience

Complete this sentence:

"In our congregation, people encounter Scripture most often through…"

Would you include:

☐ Worship
☐ Preaching
☐ Bible study
☐ Sunday school
☐ Small groups
☐ Personal devotion
☐ Prayer
☐ Mission reflection
☐ Leadership meetings
☐ Other: _____

Which of these carries the greatest influence?

2. What Happens When Scripture Is Read in Worship?

Think about an ordinary Sunday.

Who reads Scripture?

How much Scripture is typically read?

Is the lectionary used?

☐ Yes
☐ No

☐ Sometimes

Are readings usually drawn from:

☐ Old Testament
☐ Psalms
☐ Epistles
☐ Gospels
☐ A mixture

What happens after Scripture is read?

Does the congregation experience Scripture primarily as:

☐ Sacred proclamation
☐ Teaching material
☐ A source of guidance
☐ A story we inhabit
☐ A theological witness
☐ Other: _____

What does this reveal about your practice?

3. What Role Does Scripture Play in Preaching?

Sermons usually:

☐ Explain the text
☐ Connect Scripture with daily life
☐ Explore theological meaning
☐ Address ethical questions
☐ Engage current events
☐ Invite spiritual reflection
☐ Challenge the congregation
☐ Comfort the congregation
☐ Other: _____

What kind of preaching seems to nourish the congregation most?

What kind of preaching tends to create discomfort?

How much freedom does the congregation expect the preacher to have in interpretation?

Are difficult passages avoided, engaged, or handled in another way?

4. How Comfortable Are We With Questions?

In Bible study, people are generally:

☐ Comfortable asking questions
☐ Somewhat cautious
☐ Looking for clear answers
☐ Open to multiple interpretations
☐ Interested in historical context
☐ Interested in personal application
☐ Other: _____

What happens when someone says:

“I don't understand this passage.”

What happens when someone says:

“I disagree with that interpretation.”

What does this reveal about the learning culture of the congregation?

5. What Happens When Faithful Christians Disagree?

Choose a passage or issue about which Christians may interpret Scripture differently.

Do not try to resolve it here.

Ask instead:

How would our congregation usually approach the difference?

Would people feel safe expressing disagreement?

☐ Yes
☐ Sometimes
☐ No

What would help the conversation remain faithful?

What tends to make it more difficult?

What do we believe should hold us together when interpretations differ?

This tells a candidate much about how Scripture and community interact.

6. How Do We Decide What Scripture Means?

When questions arise, what resources do people tend to trust?

☐ The text itself
☐ Historical context
☐ Tradition
☐ Theology
☐ The guidance of the Holy Spirit
☐ Scholarship
☐ Personal experience
☐ The wider Church
☐ Denominational teaching
☐ Pastoral interpretation
☐ Other: _____

Which carry the most weight?

Are committee members likely to answer differently?

That difference may be part of your lived theology.

7. How Does Scripture Shape Decisions?

Think of an important congregational decision.

Was Scripture part of the discernment?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Indirectly

If yes, how?

Was Scripture used to:

☐ Seek wisdom
☐ Test assumptions
☐ Support a position
☐ Invite prayer
☐ Shape values
☐ Provide a model
☐ Challenge the congregation
☐ Other: _____

Looking back, how well was Scripture used?

This distinction matters.

Scripture can guide discernment.

It can also be used to justify a decision already made.

8. What Biblical Stories Shape Us?

Every congregation tends to return to certain stories.

A biblical story we hear often:

Why does it matter to us?

Another story:

Why?

A biblical image that feels especially important here:

Examples might include:
Body of Christ
shepherd and flock
vine and branches
exodus
wilderness
resurrection
Pentecost
table fellowship
sowing and harvest
journey
new creation
What do these stories reveal about how the congregation understands itself?

9. What Biblical Themes Appear Repeatedly?

Check themes that seem important:

☐ Grace
☐ Covenant
☐ Justice
☐ Forgiveness
☐ Discipleship
☐ Mission
☐ Reconciliation
☐ Hospitality
☐ Hope

☐ Creation
☐ Stewardship
☐ Compassion
☐ Resurrection
☐ Community
☐ Vocation
☐ Other: _____

Which three themes appear most often?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Where do they become visible in congregational life?

10. How Does Scripture Form Character?

Spiritual formation is more than knowing biblical content.

Ask:

What kind of people do we hope Scripture helps us become?

Would you name:

☐ More compassionate
☐ More courageous
☐ More forgiving
☐ More generous
☐ More hopeful
☐ More discerning
☐ More humble
☐ More just
☐ More faithful
☐ More curious
☐ Other: _____

Where do you see evidence that formation is happening?

Where do you see a gap between what we know and how we live?

11. How Are Adults Formed?

Adult spiritual formation currently includes:

☐ Bible study
☐ Sunday school
☐ Small groups
☐ Book studies
☐ Prayer groups
☐ Retreats
☐ Mission experiences
☐ Online study
☐ Other: _____

What tends to draw people?

What tends not to work?

Are adults primarily seeking:

☐ Information
☐ Community
☐ Spiritual practice
☐ Theological depth
☐ Practical application
☐ Honest questions
☐ Other: _____

What are we learning about adult formation?

12. How Are Children and Youth Formed?

Children and youth encounter Scripture through:

What do we hope they learn?

What do we hope they become?

Are children and youth invited to ask difficult questions?

Are they given opportunities to interpret, lead, and reflect?

What does our practice reveal about how we understand faith formation?

13. How Are Newer Christians or Seekers Formed?

Would someone unfamiliar with the Bible feel comfortable here?

☐ Yes
☐ Sometimes
☐ Probably not

What might make participation difficult?

Do we assume biblical knowledge people may not have?

How do we make room for people who are curious but uncertain?

What does this reveal about our understanding of discipleship?

14. How Do We Connect Scripture and Daily Life?

Where does Scripture regularly engage:

☐ Work
☐ Family
☐ Relationships
☐ Money
☐ Politics
☐ Ethics
☐ Community life
☐ Suffering
☐ Aging
☐ Parenting
☐ Vocation
☐ Justice
☐ Other: _____

Give an example:

Where do people still struggle to connect faith and daily life?

15. How Do We Approach Difficult Texts?

Some passages are troubling, confusing, violent, or contested.

Our usual response is to:

☐ Avoid them
☐ Explain them historically
☐ Interpret them theologically
☐ Invite questions
☐ Place them in conversation with other texts
☐ Ask what they reveal about human experience

☐ Other: _____

How comfortable is the congregation with saying:

“This passage is difficult.”

What do we do when Scripture itself raises moral or theological tension?

A candidate may want to know whether complexity can be named without fear.

16. What Is the Pastor Expected to Do?

We expect the pastor to:

☐ Teach Scripture
☐ Interpret difficult texts
☐ Lead Bible studies
☐ Encourage lay teaching
☐ Equip others to study Scripture
☐ Connect Scripture with daily life
☐ Challenge the congregation
☐ Preserve theological continuity
☐ Introduce new perspectives
☐ Other: _____

Which expectations are especially important?

Which may be unrealistic for one person?

What responsibility belongs to the congregation?

17. What Role Do Laypeople Have?

Who teaches Scripture besides the pastor?

How are teachers prepared?

Are different voices encouraged?

Are members comfortable leading studies?

What gifts already exist in the congregation?

How might the next pastor develop those gifts?

18. What Does Spiritual Formation Mean to Us?

Complete this sentence together:

"A spiritually mature Christian is someone who…"

Now ask:

Did our answers emphasize:

☐ Knowledge
☐ Belief
☐ Character
☐ Prayer
☐ Service
☐ Relationships
☐ Justice
☐ Generosity
☐ Wisdom
☐ Humility
☐ Discipleship
☐ Other: _____

What does that reveal?

19. How Do We Know Formation Is Happening?

Do not rely only on attendance.

Signs we would look for:

Would we notice:

☐ People asking deeper questions
☐ Greater compassion
☐ Increased generosity
☐ Healthier relationships
☐ Willingness to serve
☐ Growing capacity to live with difference
☐ Greater confidence in prayer
☐ More thoughtful engagement with Scripture
☐ Emerging leadership
☐ Other: _____

Which signs are visible now?

Which do we hope to strengthen?

20. What Are We Hungry For?

People in this congregation seem spiritually hungry for:

Questions we hear repeatedly:

Subjects people want to explore:

Areas where formation feels thin:

What do we hope our next pastor will help cultivate?

Frame this as partnership.
Do not make the pastor solely responsible for the spiritual maturity of the congregation.

21. Where Are We Being Stretched?

A biblical or theological question that currently stretches us:

Why is it difficult?

What are we learning?

Are we open to being changed through the conversation?

22. Where Do Scripture and Tradition Meet?

What traditions shape how we interpret Scripture?

Does denominational identity matter?

Where does our tradition provide helpful guidance?

Where do members experience tension with it?

A candidate needs to understand not only your written tradition, but your lived relationship with it.

23. Describe Our Scripture Culture

Complete these sentences.

In this congregation, Scripture is:

Questions are:

Different interpretations are:

Bible study is:

Preaching is expected to:

Spiritual formation is:

We are strongest when:

We are still learning:

Read the responses aloud.

Do they sound like the congregation you actually know?

24. What Would a Candidate Need to Know?

Something we value deeply:

Something we are still working through:

A biblical theme important to us:

A place where members differ:

A spiritual formation strength:

A spiritual formation challenge:

Something we hope to explore with our next pastor:

25. Questions We Might Ask a Candidate

As mutual discernment deepens, consider questions such as:

How has your relationship with Scripture changed over the years?

Tell us about a passage that has shaped your ministry.

How do you approach a text about which faithful Christians disagree?

What do you hope preaching makes possible in a congregation?

Tell us about a teaching experience where someone else's question changed the conversation.

How do you help people move from biblical knowledge toward spiritual formation?

How do you work with adults who have very different levels of biblical familiarity?

What role do questions and uncertainty play in faith formation?

How do you equip laypeople to teach and lead?

What kind of spiritual formation gives you energy?

A question especially important for us:

26. A One-Minute Response

Imagine a candidate asks:

“How does Scripture shape the life of this congregation?”

Prepare a natural answer.

We might say:

Now imagine they ask:

“What are you hoping for in spiritual formation?”

We might say:

Do these responses describe reality rather than aspiration alone?

☐ Yes
☐ Partly
☐ We need more conversation

Leader’s Note

A congregation's relationship with Scripture is revealed by more than how frequently the Bible is quoted.

It is revealed by what people do with it.

Do they bring questions?

Can they wrestle?

Can they listen when another person reads the text differently?

Can Scripture challenge the congregation as well as reassure it?

Does biblical knowledge become compassion, courage, generosity, justice, hope, and discipleship?

Does the congregation expect its pastor to provide all of that formation—or to help cultivate a community in which people learn to read, pray, question, teach, and grow together?

A candidate needs to know not simply:

“Do you value the Bible?”

They need to know:

“What happens here because you do?”

FM 6.4

Living Faithfully with Differences

Purpose

Every congregation contains differences.

People interpret Scripture differently. They understand social questions differently. They bring different political convictions, life experiences, generations, cultures, personalities, and theological emphases into the same community.

The question is not whether a congregation has differences, but how it lives with them.

A candidate needs to understand whether disagreement can be expressed honestly, whether relationships can endure tension, whether people can listen without immediately trying to win, and whether unity depends upon complete agreement.

This worksheet helps your committee describe how your congregation actually lives with difference—where you are healthy, where you struggle, and what you are still learning.

The goal is not to present yourselves as conflict-free, but to tell the truth about how you remain one body when people do not think alike.

1. Begin With Reality

Complete these sentences honestly.

In our congregation, people differ about:

Differences are easiest for us when:

Differences become more difficult when:

We tend to avoid talking about:

We tend to handle disagreement by:

2. What Kinds of Differences Live Among Us?

Check areas where meaningful differences exist.

☐ Biblical interpretation
☐ Worship preferences
☐ Theology
☐ Politics
☐ Social issues
☐ Mission priorities
☐ Finances
☐ Building use
☐ Leadership style
☐ Generational expectations
☐ Music
☐ Staff decisions
☐ Denominational issues
☐ Community engagement
☐ Other: _____

Which differences are easiest to discuss?

Which are hardest?

Why?

3. What Happens When Someone Disagrees?

Imagine someone says in a meeting:

“I see this very differently.”

What usually happens next?

☐ People become curious.
☐ Someone asks why.
☐ People begin defending positions.
☐ The room becomes quiet.
☐ The subject changes.
☐ People become anxious.
☐ Someone tries to settle the issue quickly.
☐ The disagreement continues outside the meeting.

☐ Relationships remain strong.
☐ Other: _____

What does this reveal about our congregational culture?

4. Can People Disagree and Still Belong?

In our congregation, disagreement is usually experienced as:

☐ Normal
☐ Uncomfortable but manageable
☐ Threatening to relationships
☐ A sign of disloyalty
☐ An opportunity for learning
☐ Something to avoid
☐ Different depending on the subject

What helps people remain in relationship?

What tends to damage relationships?

Do people sometimes withdraw when they do not get their way?

5. What Do We Believe Holds Us Together?

Complete:

"Our unity as a congregation is grounded in…"

Would you name:

☐ Christ
☐ Shared faith
☐ Scripture

☐ Mission
☐ Covenant
☐ Tradition
☐ Relationships
☐ Denominational identity
☐ Shared history
☐ Other: _____

What happens when agreement is not possible?

Can unity survive unresolved differences?

If yes, what makes that possible?

6. What Have We Learned From a Difficult Difference?

Choose one significant disagreement from congregational life.

Do not reopen the argument. Use it to understand the congregation.

The issue was:

Why did it matter so much?

What values were in tension?

How did people behave?

What helped?

What made it harder?

What did we learn?

What would we do differently now?

7. Listen for the Values Beneath the Positions

People often argue about positions while protecting deeper values.

For example:

Position:
"We must keep the traditional service."

Possible values underneath:
Continuity, memory, beauty, belonging, identity.

Position:
"We need a new style of worship."

Possible values underneath:
Accessibility, relevance, participation, welcome, mission.

Practice with one of your own differences.

Position One:

What values might lie underneath?

Position Two:

What values might lie underneath?

Are any of those values shared?

Finding shared values does not resolve every disagreement, but it can change the conversation.

8. How Well Do We Listen?

When someone disagrees with us, do we usually listen for:

☐ What they believe
☐ Why they believe it
☐ What experience shaped them
☐ What they fear losing
☐ What they hope to protect
☐ What we can rebut
☐ What we can correct
☐ Other: _____

What are we good at?

What do we need to improve?

9. Can We Describe Another Person's View Fairly?

A useful test of listening is whether we can describe another person's position in a way they would recognize as fair.

Choose a current difference.

One perspective:

Now write a fair description of the other perspective:

Ask:

Would someone who holds that view recognize themselves in our description?

☐ Yes
☐ Probably
☐ No

If not, you may not understand it well enough yet.

10. How Do We Handle Strong Emotion?

Differences sometimes bring anxiety, anger, grief, or fear.

When emotion rises, we tend to:

☐ Slow down
☐ Listen
☐ Become defensive
☐ Seek a quick decision
☐ Avoid the issue
☐ Become personal
☐ Pray
☐ Seek help
☐ Other: _____

What helps lower anxiety?

Who tends to help the congregation remain grounded?

11. How Do We Handle Criticism?

Imagine someone strongly criticizes:

the pastor

session

a ministry

a worship decision

another member

What usually happens?

Is criticism addressed directly?

Is it carried through informal conversations?

Are people encouraged to speak with the person involved?

What would a new pastor experience?
Be honest. A candidate needs to know whether criticism travels toward relationships or around them.

12. How Do Leaders Behave When They Disagree?

When session members disagree:

Is disagreement recorded respectfully?

Can a minority view be heard without derailing a decision?

Once a decision is made, leaders usually:
☐ Support it
☐ Continue arguing publicly
☐ Accept it reluctantly
☐ Revisit it repeatedly
☐ Depends on the issue

What does this reveal about leadership culture?

13. What Happens When the Pastor Disagrees With the Congregation?

Can the pastor express a different perspective?

How is that usually received?

Does disagreement with the pastor become personal?

Does the congregation expect the pastor to avoid controversial subjects?

Does the congregation expect the pastor to take positions publicly?

What would a candidate need to understand?

14. What Happens When the Congregation Disagrees With the Pastor?

How are concerns communicated?

Who speaks with the pastor?

Are concerns brought directly or indirectly?

What role does session play?

What has worked well in the past?

What has not?

15. Where Does Theology Enter Difference?

When people disagree, do theological convictions help guide the conversation?

What beliefs matter most?

Perhaps:

every person bears the image of God
Christ holds the Church together
grace applies to people who disagree
humility matters
truth matters
love does not require agreement
reconciliation is part of discipleship

Which convictions are easiest to affirm?

Which are hardest to practice?

16. What Does Scripture Do in Disagreement?

Scripture is usually used to:

☐ Seek wisdom
☐ Clarify values
☐ Support one side
☐ Challenge everyone
☐ Set boundaries
☐ Invite reflection
☐ Other: _____

What happens when people interpret Scripture differently?

Can people say:

"I read this differently than you do."
and remain in community?

17. What Role Does Power Play?

Not every voice carries equal influence.

In our congregation, people with particular influence include:

Whose voices are easiest to hear?

Whose voices may be overlooked?

Does financial giving affect influence?

Does length of membership affect influence?

Do formal leaders and informal leaders differ?

What should a new pastor understand about this?
Differences are harder to navigate when power remains invisible.

18. Who Leaves the Conversation?

Think carefully.

When difficult issues arise, who tends to speak?

Who tends to remain quiet?

Who withdraws?

Who becomes more vocal?

What might silence mean?
Do not assume silence means agreement.

19. Do We Confuse Peace With Avoidance?

Complete:

We know a disagreement is unresolved when:

We sometimes keep the peace by:

The cost of doing that is:

A healthier response might be:
Congregational peace can be healthy. So can necessary discomfort.

20. Do We Confuse Conviction With Certainty?

People can hold strong convictions without believing every other faithful person must agree.

In our congregation, strong conviction is usually expressed by:

Can someone say:
"I believe this deeply, and I understand why you see it differently"?

Where is that possible?

Where is it difficult?

21. How Do We Make Decisions When Agreement Is Not Possible?

Do we seek:
☐ Unanimity
☐ Consensus
☐ Majority vote
☐ Governing body decision
☐ Pastoral leadership
☐ Denominational guidance

☐ Different approaches depending on the issue

What happens after the decision?

Can people remain faithful members while disagreeing with the outcome?

What makes that possible or difficult?

22. What Differences Require Boundaries?

Living faithfully with difference does not mean every position or behavior must be accepted.

Ask:

Are there theological or ethical boundaries important to our congregation?

Are they clearly understood?

Who establishes them?

How are they communicated?

Can people distinguish between:

disagreement

and

harmful behavior?

Hospitality does not require tolerating cruelty, intimidation, harassment, or abuse.

23. What Have We Become Better At?

During the last several years, we have become better at:

What helped us grow?

Who helped?

What practice changed?

What difference has that made?
Candidates should hear where the congregation has grown, not only where it struggles.

24. What Are We Still Learning?

Complete:

“When people disagree, we are still learning how to…”

“We need to become better at…”

“One pattern we hope not to repeat is…”

“One practice we hope to strengthen is…”

25. What Might a Candidate Experience?

Imagine the candidate has been your pastor for eighteen months.

A difficult issue emerges.

They might experience us as:

They might find especially healthy:

They might find especially difficult:

Something we should tell them now:

26. Preparing an Honest Response

Imagine the candidate asks:

“What happens here when people disagree?”

A polished answer might be:

The more honest answer is:

A story we could tell:

What we learned from it:

27. Another Candidate Question

“Can people here hold different political or theological convictions and still belong fully?”

Our honest response:

Where that has worked well:

Where it has been harder:

28. Questions We Might Ask the Candidate

Mutual discernment invites you to explore the candidate's experience too.

Consider:

Tell us about a time when you and someone you respected saw an important issue differently.

What helped the relationship continue?

Tell us about a disagreement that changed your understanding.

How do you approach a congregation where people hold significantly different theological or political convictions?

What helps you remain curious when you strongly disagree?

How do you respond when someone criticizes you publicly?

How do you distinguish between a disagreement that can remain unresolved and an issue that requires a decision?

What do you need from church leaders when disagreement becomes intense?

A question particularly important for us:

29. A Practice for Difficult Conversations

When your committee itself encounters a significant difference, try this pattern.

First

Each person answers:

What do you most want the rest of us to understand?

No responses yet.

Listen around the table.

Then ask:

What did you hear someone else say that you had not fully understood before?

Then:

What value are you trying to protect?

Finally:

What do we share even though we do not agree?

Only then move toward deciding what happens next.

This practice will not resolve every disagreement. It may help the committee become a community capable of discerning through one.

30. Describe Our Culture of Difference

Complete together:

When we disagree, we tend to:

At our best, we:

Under stress, we:

We are learning to:

We want our next pastor to know:

We hope our next pastor will help us:

We also understand that our responsibility is:

Read your answers aloud.

Do they describe the congregation honestly?

Leader's Note

A congregation does not demonstrate maturity by eliminating disagreement, but by learning how to remain faithful when agreement is incomplete.

Can people tell the truth?

Can they listen?

Can they distinguish conviction from contempt?

Can they allow another person's experience to complicate their own?

Can leaders make decisions without treating those who disagree as enemies?

Can relationships continue after a vote?

Can people apologize?

Can they change their minds?

Can they remain one body without pretending they are all the same?

A candidate needs to know what kind of theological diversity exists in your congregation.

Underneath that question lies a more important one: What happens to relationships when the differences become real?

Do not tell the candidate you have no conflict. Tell them what you have learned about loving one another when you disagree.

FM 6.5

Our Relationship with the Wider Church

Purpose

No congregation exists by itself.

Every congregation belongs to a larger story of Christian faith and witness, connected to other congregations, denominational structures, ecumenical partners, theological traditions, mission relationships, and the Church across generations and around the world.

But congregations experience those connections differently.

For some, denominational identity is deeply important. Others rarely think about it. Some participate actively in presbytery, synod, or denominational life. Others experience the wider Church primarily through mission partnerships, camps, seminaries, ecumenical ministries, or relationships with neighboring congregations.

A candidate needs to understand those relationships because a pastor is called not only into a congregation, but also into its connections with the wider Church.

This worksheet helps you describe those relationships honestly.

The question is not simply what denomination you belong to, but how belonging to the wider Church shapes your life and ministry.

1. Begin With Belonging

Complete:

“We understand ourselves as part of the wider Church because…”

When members hear “the wider Church,” they probably think about:

☐ Our denomination
☐ Presbytery or regional governing body
☐ Neighboring congregations
☐ Ecumenical relationships
☐ Mission partners
☐ Seminaries
☐ Camps and conference centers
☐ National church agencies
☐ Global Christianity
☐ The historic Church
☐ Other: _____

Which of these connections feel most real to us?

Which feel distant?

2. How Important Is Denominational Identity?

If someone asked a member why we belong to our denomination, they might say:

Our denominational identity is:

☐ Central to congregational identity
☐ Important but not emphasized
☐ More important to some members than others
☐ Primarily historical
☐ Primarily organizational
☐ Rarely discussed
☐ Something we are currently reconsidering
☐ Other: _____

What parts of our tradition matter most?

What parts do members know little about?

3. What Does Our Tradition Give Us?

Think beyond institutional affiliation.

Our theological tradition gives us:

Our worship tradition gives us:

Our polity gives us:

Our connection with other congregations gives us:

Our denomination helps make possible:

Something we might miss if those connections disappeared:

4. What Do We Give to the Wider Church?

Connection is not only about what the congregation receives.

We participate through:

☐ Financial support
☐ Shared mission
☐ Committee service
☐ Denominational leadership

☐ Hosting gatherings
☐ Mission personnel
☐ Disaster response
☐ Camps or conferences
☐ Theological education
☐ Ecumenical ministries
☐ Other: _____

Members who currently serve beyond the congregation:

Gifts our congregation contributes to the wider Church:

A story that illustrates our participation:

5. Our Relationship With Presbytery or Regional Leadership

We would describe our relationship as:

☐ Strong
☐ Cooperative
☐ Occasional
☐ Primarily administrative
☐ Distant
☐ Difficult
☐ Changing
☐ Other: _____

Members who participate:

Ways the presbytery or regional body has supported us:

Ways we have supported its ministry:

A candidate should know:

6. What Do We Expect of the Pastor?

Congregations sometimes expect pastors to participate in the wider Church without discussing how much participation is appropriate.

We expect our pastor to:

☐ Attend presbytery or regional meetings
☐ Serve on committees or commissions
☐ Participate in clergy gatherings
☐ Build relationships with neighboring pastors
☐ Participate in denominational leadership
☐ Engage ecumenically
☐ Support wider-church mission
☐ Represent the congregation beyond the church
☐ Other: _____

How much time do we expect this to require?

Do we regard this as part of the pastor's ministry?

☐ Yes
☐ Sometimes
☐ We have not discussed it

What would healthy participation look like?

7. Do We Support the Pastor's Wider-Church Service?

It is inconsistent to expect wider-Church participation and then treat time spent doing it as time away from ministry.

When the pastor attends a denominational meeting, we tend to think:

When the pastor serves in wider-church leadership:

Do our expectations allow adequate time for that work?

Would we encourage the pastor to accept significant wider-church responsibilities?

Under what circumstances?

8. Our Relationship With Neighboring Congregations

Congregations with which we have meaningful relationships:

We cooperate through:

☐ Worship
☐ Mission
☐ Community ministries
☐ Christian education
☐ Youth ministry
☐ Clergy relationships
☐ Shared facilities
☐ Advocacy
☐ Community events
☐ Other: _____

A relationship that has been particularly meaningful:

What have we learned from another congregation?

9. Ecumenical Relationships

We currently have relationships with Christians from other traditions through:

Those relationships are:

☐ Strong
☐ Occasional
☐ Primarily clergy relationships
☐ Primarily mission partnerships
☐ Limited
☐ Something we would like to strengthen

What have other Christian traditions taught us?

Are there traditions with which partnership would be difficult?

Why?

10. The Church Beyond Our Community

How aware is the congregation that Christianity is larger than the American Church or its own denominational tradition?

We encounter the global Church through:

☐ Mission partnerships
☐ Missionaries or mission personnel
☐ International congregations
☐ Immigration and refugee ministries
☐ Denominational relationships
☐ Travel
☐ Worship
☐ Educational programs
☐ We have little direct connection
☐ Other: _____

A global relationship that has shaped us:

Something Christians elsewhere have taught us:

How visible is the global Church in our prayers and worship?

11. Our Relationship With the Historic Church

The wider Church also extends backward through time.

Members are familiar with:

☐ Creeds
☐ Confessions
☐ Church history
☐ Reformation traditions
☐ Denominational history
☐ Historic worship practices
☐ Saints and Christian witnesses
☐ Other: _____

Which parts of Christian tradition remain important to us?

How does tradition shape present practice?

When does tradition become difficult for us?

12. Confessions and Statements of Faith

Creeds or confessions are:

☐ Used regularly in worship
☐ Used occasionally
☐ Studied
☐ Important to our identity

☐ Familiar mainly to leaders
☐ Rarely discussed
☐ Other: _____

A confession or statement particularly important to us:

Why?

How does it shape congregational life?

13. Our Relationship With Denominational Decisions

Wider-church decisions sometimes create strong reactions locally.

When our denomination makes an important decision, members usually:
☐ Pay close attention
☐ Discuss it
☐ Hear about it from the pastor
☐ Have differing reactions
☐ Rarely notice
☐ Other: _____

A denominational issue that significantly affected us:

What happened?

What did we learn?

14. Where Do We Differ From the Wider Church?

Connection does not require agreement about everything.

Members sometimes disagree with denominational positions concerning:

These differences are:

☐ Openly discussed
☐ Accepted
☐ Sources of tension
☐ Rarely discussed
☐ Different among members

Can we remain connected while disagreeing?

What makes that possible?

15. Where Does the Wider Church Stretch Us?

Our denomination or wider Church has challenged us to think differently about:

A position or practice we understand differently now:

What contributed to that change?

Something we are still wrestling with:

Belonging to a wider Church means voices beyond the congregation sometimes challenge local assumptions.

16. Where Have We Needed the Wider Church?

Think about moments when independence was not enough.

We have needed help with:

☐ Pastoral transitions
☐ Conflict

☐ Disaster
☐ Financial concerns
☐ Legal or polity questions
☐ Leadership development
☐ Mission
☐ Staff issues
☐ Congregational discernment
☐ Other: _____

A time when the wider Church helped us:

What difference did that relationship make?

17. How Do We Respond to Accountability?

Connectional churches include mutual accountability.

When denominational requirements affect us, we tend to:

☐ Appreciate the guidance
☐ Cooperate readily
☐ Ask questions
☐ Experience frustration
☐ Prefer greater independence
☐ Respond differently depending on the issue

What forms of accountability do we value?

What forms are difficult?

What should a candidate understand?

18. How Independent Do We Imagine Ourselves to Be?

Complete:

"This is our church, and…"

Now:

"This congregation belongs to something larger, and…"

Which sentence feels more natural to us?

What might that reveal?

19. How Does Connection Shape Mission?

Ministries we could not do alone:

Mission supported through our denomination:

Ecumenical partnerships that expand our capacity:

What does connection make possible?

20. How Does Connection Shape Our Theology?

Something our tradition teaches that remains deeply important:

Something the wider Church reminds us that we might otherwise forget:

Something another Christian tradition has taught us:

Something the global Church has taught us:

What does this reveal about why we need one another?

21. How Does Connection Shape Leadership?

Our leaders learn from the wider Church through:

☐ Training
☐ Presbytery or regional meetings
☐ Conferences
☐ Denominational resources
☐ Relationships with other congregations
☐ Coaching or consultation
☐ Other: _____

A leadership practice we learned from somewhere beyond our congregation:

Where could we benefit from greater connection?

22. What Do We Expect the Next Pastor to Know?

We expect familiarity with:

☐ Our polity
☐ Our theological tradition

☐ Denominational structures
☐ Confessions
☐ Presbytery or regional life
☐ Ecumenical relationships
☐ Denominational mission
☐ Other: _____

Which expectations are essential?

Which can be learned?
Do not confuse unfamiliarity with unwillingness to learn.

23. What If the Candidate Comes From Somewhere Different?

A candidate may come from:
another presbytery or region
another part of the country
another cultural context
another denomination
a different theological emphasis within your tradition

What would they need to learn about us?

What might they bring that could enrich us?

Are we open to learning from their experience?

What questions would we want to ask?

24. What Would a Candidate Discover?

Imagine a candidate serves with you for two years.

They would discover that our relationship with the wider Church is:

They would probably appreciate:

They might find frustrating:

They might be surprised by:

Something we should tell them now:

25. Preparing an Honest Response

Imagine the candidate asks:

"How important is your denominational identity to this congregation?"

Our honest response:

Candidate asks:

"What relationship does this congregation have with the presbytery or regional body?"

Our response:

Candidate asks:

“What involvement would you expect from me beyond the congregation?”

Our response:

Candidate asks:

“How does the congregation respond when it disagrees with the denomination?”

Our response:

26. Questions We Might Ask the Candidate

Consider:

What has your relationship with the wider Church been like?

Tell us about a wider-church relationship that has shaped your ministry.

What have you received from your theological tradition?

How do you understand the relationship between a congregation and the denomination of which it is part?

What role has presbytery or regional participation played in your ministry?

How do you approach denominational decisions with which members of a congregation may disagree?

What have you learned from Christians outside your own tradition?

What have you learned from the global Church?

What kind of wider-church involvement gives you energy?

What kind of involvement would you hope we would support?

A question especially important for us:

27. What Are We Learning About Connection?

Complete:

We are grateful to the wider Church for:

We contribute to the wider Church by:

We struggle with:

We need the wider Church when:

The wider Church needs congregations like ours because:

We would like to strengthen:

28. Describe Our Relationship With the Wider Church

Complete together:

We belong to:

That belonging matters because:

Our strongest connections are:

Our weakest connections are:

We sometimes disagree about:

We are learning:

We hope our next pastor will:

We understand our own responsibility to be:

Leader's Note

Congregations can easily imagine themselves as self-contained.

Our building.

Our members.

Our pastor.

Our budget.

Our ministry.

But the Church has never belonged to a single congregation.

The Church stretches across communities, traditions, cultures, nations, and centuries. We inherit faith from people we never knew. We receive wisdom from Christians whose experiences are unlike our own. We participate in ministries we could never accomplish by ourselves. And sometimes we need the counsel, correction, encouragement, or accountability of people beyond our own congregation.

A candidate needs to understand how your congregation lives within those relationships and whether you will support their participation in them.

A pastor who attends a presbytery meeting, serves the wider Church, builds an ecumenical relationship, or learns from colleagues is not stepping away from congregational ministry.

They may be helping the congregation remember something essential: we are part of a Church much larger than ourselves.

Sometimes we need that larger Church to help us become more fully who Christ calls us to be.

FM 6.6

Preparing a One-Minute Response

Purpose

Candidates will ask theological questions.

Sometimes they will ask directly:

“How would you describe the theology of this congregation?”

Or:

“How does Scripture shape your life together?”

“How do you handle theological differences?”

“What does being Presbyterian mean to you?”

The temptation is to give either a very long answer or a very safe one. Neither is particularly helpful.

A one-minute response gives the candidate enough to understand where the congregation stands while leaving room for conversation.

This worksheet helps committee members practice brief, honest responses to theological questions.

The goal is not to create approved answers to memorize, but to know your congregation's lived theology well enough to speak about it naturally.

1. What Can You Say in One Minute?

One minute is approximately 125–150 spoken words.

That is enough to say something meaningful, but not enough to explain everything.

A useful one-minute response usually does four things:

It answers the question.

Do not spend forty-five seconds preparing to answer.

It speaks from experience.

Describe what theology looks like in this congregation.

It acknowledges complexity.

If members differ, say so.

It opens the conversation.

Leave something for the candidate to ask next.

A one-minute response is not the whole conversation. It starts one.

2. Begin With the Question Actually Asked

Imagine the candidate asks:

“How would you describe the theology of this congregation?”

Before answering, ask yourself:

What are they probably trying to understand?

What is most important for them to know?

What would be misleading to leave out?

Now answer the question.

Our one-minute response:

3. Use a Simple Pattern

When you are unsure how to begin, use:

We believe…

You can see that in…

We are not all in the same place about…

We are still exploring…

For example:

“Grace is probably one of the strongest theological themes in our congregation. You hear it in worship, but I think you see it most clearly in the way people care for one another and try to make room for people who are different from them. We are not of one mind on every theological or social question, and sometimes those differences are difficult. But we generally believe that our belonging to Christ is deeper than those differences. We are still learning what that means in practice.”

Notice what this response does not do: it does not attempt to describe every theological conviction. It gives the candidate something real to explore.

4. Begin With "You Would Notice…"

Another useful opening is:

"If you spent time with us, I think you would notice…"

This moves quickly from abstraction to lived theology.

Try it.

If you spent time with us, I think you would notice…

What story could illustrate that?

This connects directly with **FM 6.2 — If Someone Worshiped Here…**

5. Answer With a Story

Sometimes the best one-minute theological response begins with an experience.

Candidate asks:

"How important is mission to this congregation?"

Instead of:

"Mission is one of our core values."

you might begin:

"One story probably tells that better than I can…"

A theological question candidates might ask:

A story that could help answer it:

What theological conviction does the story reveal?

Tell the story in one minute:

6. Scripture

Imagine the candidate asks:

“How does this congregation understand Scripture?”

Do not simply answer:

“We believe the Bible is the Word of God.”

or:

“Scripture is very important to us.”

Those statements may be true, but they tell the candidate little about how Scripture functions among you.

Draw on **FM 6.3 — Scripture and Spiritual Formation**.

What should the candidate understand?

Our one-minute response:

Something we would invite them to explore further:

7. Spiritual Formation

Candidate asks:

“What are you hoping for in Christian formation?”

What is already happening?

What are you hungry for?

What responsibility belongs to the congregation?

What partnership do you hope for from the pastor?

Our one-minute response:

8. Theological Diversity

Candidate asks:

"How much theological diversity is there in the congregation?"

Draw on **FM 6.4 — Living Faithfully with Differences**.

Differences that actually exist:

What holds you together:

Where you struggle:

What you are learning:

Our one-minute response:

9. Political Differences

Candidate asks:

"How politically diverse is the congregation?"

Avoid pretending politics does not exist or assigning the congregation a political label unless it genuinely describes reality.

What is true?

What differences exist?

What becomes difficult?

What helps relationships continue?

Our one-minute response:

10. Social Questions

Candidate asks about a social or ethical issue that matters deeply to them.

Before answering, distinguish between:

Denominational position:

Congregational reality:

Differences among members:

Current practice:

Our one-minute response:

Do not imply consensus where none exists.

11. Denominational Identity

Candidate asks:

“What does being Presbyterian mean to this congregation?”
Draw on **FM 6.5 — Our Relationship with the Wider Church**.

What matters most about the tradition?

How is that visible?

What relationship do you have with the wider Church?

Our one-minute response:

12. The Wider Church

Candidate asks:

“What involvement would you expect me to have in presbytery and the wider Church?”

Our expectations:

Why that involvement matters:

How we would support it:

Our one-minute response:

13. Worship

Candidate asks:

“What is most important to this congregation about worship?”
Do not simply list worship preferences. Ask what lies beneath them.

What people value:

Why it matters:

Where there is flexibility:

Where change may require conversation:

Our one-minute response:

14. Communion

Candidate asks:

“How does the congregation understand the Lord’s Supper?”

What do we believe?

What does our practice communicate?

What matters most to members?

Our one-minute response:

15. Mission

Candidate asks:

“What does mission mean here?”

What we say:

What we actually do:

What we are learning:

Where we hope to grow:

Our one-minute response:

16. Belonging

Candidate asks:

“Who belongs here?”

Be careful. “Everyone is welcome” is not yet an answer.

Who experiences belonging easily?

Who may find it harder?

What are we learning?

Our one-minute response:

17. Change

Candidate asks:

“How open is the congregation to change?”

Avoid:

“Very open.”

Also avoid:

“They don't like change.”
Neither says enough.

A change we handled well:

A change that was difficult:

What we learned:

Our one-minute response:

18. Difficult Differences

Candidate asks:

“What happens when people strongly disagree?”

At our best:

Under stress:

Something we have learned:

Something we are still learning:

Our one-minute response:

19. The Question That Makes Us Nervous

What theological question do you most hope the candidate does not ask?

Why does it make us uncomfortable?

What is the truthful answer?

Where do members differ?

What can honestly be said in one minute?
If you cannot answer yet, you may have identified a conversation the committee needs to have.

20. Do Not Hide Behind "Some People"

Search committees sometimes protect themselves with vague language:

"Some people think…"

"There are those who…"

"We have all kinds of opinions…"
Sometimes that is accurate; sometimes it avoids saying what is actually true.

Practice greater clarity.

Instead of:

"Some people have concerns about that."
Say what you actually know:

Instead of:

"We're pretty diverse on that issue."
Describe the diversity:

Instead of:

"That's never really been a problem."
Describe what has actually happened:

Specificity builds trust.

21. Do Not Speak for Everyone

No committee member can perfectly represent every member of the congregation.

Useful phrases include:

“My experience of the congregation is…”

“I think many of us would say…”

“There are different perspectives about that.”

“I can tell you how I understand it, and others around this table may add something.”

“That is something we are still discussing.”

A question where we should avoid implying consensus:

A truthful way to describe the range:

22. Let Committee Members Answer Differently

Choose a question.

Have each committee member answer it in one minute.

Do not try to make the answers identical.

Then ask:

What appeared repeatedly?

Where did answers differ?

Were the differences contradictory?

Or did they reveal different parts of the same congregation?

What did we learn?

The candidate does not need a choir reading from the same script. They need trustworthy witnesses.

23. Listen to Your Language

After giving a response, ask:

Did we use insider language?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we use theological jargon without explanation?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we sound defensive?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we sound promotional?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we answer the question?

☐ Yes
☐ Partly

Did we leave room for conversation?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If the answer sounds like website copy, try again.

24. The Thirty-Second Version

Sometimes one minute is too long.

Choose one question:

Answer it in thirty seconds:

What did you have to remove?

What remained essential?

This exercise helps identify the heart of the response.

25. The Two-Minute Version

Now take the same question.

Answer it in two minutes:

What did the additional minute allow you to add?

☐ A story
☐ Complexity
☐ History
☐ Differences
☐ An example
☐ A question back to the candidate

What belongs in the first minute?

What belongs in the conversation that follows?

26. Practice the Follow-Up

A good one-minute response should make another question possible.

Candidate asks:

Our one-minute response:

Candidate might naturally ask next:

We would then explore:

That is the goal: not a complete answer, but a conversation.

27. Invite the Candidate In

After answering, you may occasionally ask:

“How does that connect with your own experience?”

or:

“What does that raise for you?”

or:

“Is there something in what I just said that you would like us to say more about?”

A place where we would particularly want to hear the candidate’s response:

Do not turn every answer into another interview question. Sometimes let the candidate receive what you have said.

28. Our Six One-Minute Responses

Before a serious interview, identify six questions the committee should be prepared to answer.

1. _____

Our response:

2. _____

Our response:

3. _____

Our response:

4. _____

Our response:

5. _____

Our response:

6. _____

Our response:

29. Final Practice

Pair committee members.

One person is the candidate.

The other responds.

The candidate chooses one question without warning.

The committee member has one minute.

Then switch.

After each response, the listener answers only three questions:

What did I understand clearly?

What made me curious?

What sounded rehearsed, vague, or incomplete?

Do not evaluate whether you liked the answer. Ask whether you understood the congregation better.

30. Before the Interview

Remind one another:

☐ We do not need perfect answers.
☐ We do not need identical answers.
☐ We do need truthful answers.
☐ We can acknowledge differences.
☐ We can say we are still learning.
☐ We can tell stories.
☐ We can say “I don't know.”
☐ We can answer briefly.
☐ We can allow silence afterward.
☐ We can trust the candidate to ask another question.

Leader’s Note

The purpose of preparing one-minute responses is not to make the committee sound polished. Too much polish can work against mutual discernment.

A candidate asks a theological question to understand the people with whom they may share ministry.

They need enough clarity to know what matters to you.

Enough honesty to know where you differ.

Enough humility to know what you are still learning.

And enough openness to know that the conversation is not already finished.

So prepare.

Know your congregation.

Know the stories.

Know where the differences are.

Then stop preparing sentences.

When the candidate asks the question, listen carefully.

Answer the question they actually asked.

And after about a minute, stop.

Let them be curious.

The best theological conversations rarely begin with a complete answer.

Chapter Seven — When the Journey Takes an Unexpected Turn

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 7.1

When a Candidate Withdraws

Purpose

Candidates withdraw.

They may receive another call, encounter changing circumstances, reconsider something they have learned about the congregation, or simply recognize through the search that this is not where they are called.

A withdrawal can be disappointing, especially when the committee has become hopeful about a candidate.

Withdrawal is not necessarily a failure of the search.

Mutual discernment includes the freedom to say both **yes** and **no**.

This resource helps the committee respond graciously when a candidate withdraws, learn what can appropriately be learned, communicate responsibly, and return to the search without allowing disappointment to distort what comes next.

The first task is simple:

Receive the candidate's decision with grace.

1. When the Candidate Tells You

Whether the withdrawal comes by telephone, email, or conversation, resist the impulse to persuade the candidate to reconsider.

A simple response is enough:

"Thank you for letting us know. We are disappointed because we have valued getting to know you, but we respect your discernment and are grateful for the conversations we have shared."

If appropriate:

"If you are comfortable sharing anything about your decision that might help us in our continuing search, we would be glad to listen. But please do not feel obligated."

Then listen.

Do not argue.

Do not defend the congregation.

Do not negotiate unless the candidate identifies a practical matter they genuinely want to discuss.

2. What Do We Know?

Before the committee begins interpreting the withdrawal, separate facts from assumptions.

What did the candidate actually tell us?

Did the candidate give a reason?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, what did they say?

What do we know as fact?

What are we assuming?

Keep these separate.

A committee can easily create an explanation for a decision the candidate never actually explained.

3. Do We Need More Information?

Ask:

Is there something we genuinely need to understand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Would knowing it help our continuing search?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Or are we simply uncomfortable not knowing?

Candidates are not required to provide a full explanation for withdrawing.

Respect the boundary.

4. If the Candidate Offers Feedback

Listen carefully.

The candidate told us:

What did we hear?

What was difficult to hear?

Did we immediately want to explain or defend ourselves?

What might be worth considering?

You do not have to agree with every observation,
but do not dismiss feedback simply because it is uncomfortable.

5. If the Candidate Gives No Reason

Do not invent one.

Avoid statements such as:

“They probably got a better offer.”

“They weren't really committed.”

“They must not have liked us.”

“I knew they weren't right.”

“God closed the door.”

You do not know.

A more faithful response is:

“We do not know why the candidate withdrew. We know only that they discerned they should not continue.”

That is enough.

6. Allow the Disappointment

What are we feeling?

☐ Disappointed
☐ Surprised
☐ Relieved
☐ Angry
☐ Confused
☐ Rejected
☐ Discouraged
☐ Grateful
☐ Other: _____

What had we begun hoping?

What are we grieving?

Do not rush into evaluating the next candidate.

The committee may need time to acknowledge what has ended.

7. Notice the Language of Rejection

A committee may begin saying:

“They rejected us.”

Is that what happened?

Perhaps.

Usually, the candidate made a vocational decision about a particular call.

Try instead:

“The candidate discerned that this was not the call they should continue pursuing.”

The distinction matters.

A candidate can value your congregation and still conclude that they are not called to serve it.

8. Remember What Mutual Discernment Means

Return to the purpose of the search.

The goal was never:

Find a candidate we like and convince them to come.

The goal is to discover whether candidate and congregation recognize a possible call together.

That means either party must be free to stop.

Did the candidate have genuine freedom to withdraw?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did our process communicate that freedom?

Would we want the same freedom if we concluded the candidate was not right for us?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Mutuality requires both.

9. What Had We Learned From This Candidate?

Even when a candidate withdraws, the conversations may have helped the committee.

Something this candidate helped us understand about ministry:

Something they helped us recognize about our congregation:

A question they asked that mattered:

Something we learned about what we are seeking:

Something we learned about what may not fit:

The relationship can have mattered even though it did not result in a call.

10. What Did the Candidate Notice About Us?

Think about their questions.

What did they seem particularly interested in?

What did they ask about repeatedly?

What appeared to concern them?

Did they notice something we had not recognized?

Is there anything we should explore further?

11. Review the Process, Not Just the Candidate

Ask whether anything about your process deserves attention.

Was communication timely?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Were expectations clear?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did the process move at an appropriate pace?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we provide the information the candidate needed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Were we honest about strengths and challenges?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did the candidate have adequate opportunity to ask questions?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did our interviews feel conversational?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did we communicate genuine interest?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did we leave unusually long periods without communication?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is there anything we would change?

Do not assume the process caused the withdrawal;

simply learn what can be learned.

12. Was There Something We Revealed?

Perhaps the candidate withdrew after learning something important about the congregation.

That does not mean you should have hidden it.

Ask:

Was there information that seemed to affect the candidate's discernment?

Was that information accurate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Was it necessary for faithful discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If it was both accurate and necessary, transparency did its job.

Do not conclude:

“We shouldn't tell the next candidate that.”

The better conclusion may be:

“We need candidates to know this early enough to discern honestly.”

13. Is There a Pattern?

One withdrawal may tell you very little.

Repeated withdrawals around the same point deserve attention.

Have other candidates raised similar questions?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Have multiple candidates withdrawn at approximately the same stage?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Is the same concern appearing repeatedly?

If so, what might we need to examine?

Do not redesign the search around one person's reaction,

but do pay attention to patterns.

14. Is the Position What We Say It Is?

A withdrawal may occasionally expose a mismatch between the advertised call and the actual expectations.

Ask:

Are the responsibilities clear?

Are our expectations realistic?

Is the Terms of Call appropriate?

Are we expecting one pastor to carry too much?

Are there expectations we have not named publicly?

Does our Ministry Discernment Profile accurately describe the ministry?

Is there anything we should reconsider before continuing?

15. Is Compensation Part of the Pattern?

If compensation was identified as an issue, examine it rather than becoming defensive.

Did the candidate raise concerns about:

☐ Salary
☐ Housing
☐ Benefits
☐ Moving expenses
☐ Continuing education
☐ Vacation
☐ Family considerations
☐ Cost of living
☐ Other: _____

What did we learn?

Is our Terms of Call competitive and realistic?

Does anything require further review?

Do not assume that a candidate who considers compensation lacks vocation.

Pastors have households, obligations, and financial realities too.

16. Did Geography or Family Circumstances Matter?

Sometimes the reason has little to do with the congregation.

The candidate may be discerning:

a spouse or partner's employment

children and schools
aging parents
housing
health care
distance from family
relocation
another vocational opportunity

Did the candidate identify practical circumstances?

Is there anything we need to learn from them?

There may be nothing to fix.
Respect the reality of the candidate's life.

17. What Do We Tell the Congregation?

Confidentiality continues after withdrawal.

Who needs to know?

What do they need to know?

What remains confidential?

If the congregation knew that the committee was in serious conversation with a candidate, an appropriate communication may be:
"The candidate with whom we were in conversation has decided to withdraw from the process. We are grateful for the conversations we shared and wish them well as they continue their discernment. The Search Committee will continue its work."

Nothing more may be necessary.

18. What Do We Tell Other Candidates?

If other candidates remain active, do not share details about the withdrawing candidate.

Do not say:

“Our first choice dropped out.”

Do not make another candidate feel like the replacement.

What communication is necessary?

What information is confidential?

Every candidate deserves to be engaged as a person, not as a position on a ranking list.

19. What Happens to Our Notes?

Follow the confidentiality practices established by the committee and the requirements of your presbytery or governing body.

Candidate materials include:

☐ Application or profile
☐ Interview notes
☐ References
☐ Emails
☐ Evaluation forms
☐ Background information
☐ Other: _____

Our agreed process for withdrawn candidate materials is:

Person responsible:

Do not retain or circulate candidate information simply because someone might want it later.

20. Should We Leave the Door Open?

Sometimes a candidate withdraws because circumstances make continuing impossible now.

Do not assume they will return.

But if appropriate, you may say:

“We respect your decision. If circumstances change and you believe another conversation would be appropriate, you are welcome to contact us.”

Use this only if the committee genuinely means it.

Do not use it to keep emotional pressure on the candidate.

21. Should We Try to Change Their Mind?

Usually, no.

But distinguish withdrawal from negotiation.

If a candidate says:

“I don't think I can continue because the housing situation appears impossible for my family.”

and the committee knows there are realistic options the candidate has not considered, it is reasonable to ask:

“Would it be helpful to talk about that before you make a final decision?”

If they say no, accept the answer.

The purpose is clarification, not persuasion.

22. Do We Immediately Return to the Next Candidate?

Not necessarily.

Before doing so, ask:

Are we ready to engage another candidate fairly?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we still comparing everyone to the person who withdrew?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we tempted to move too quickly because we are afraid of losing another candidate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we tempted to become overly cautious?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What do we need before continuing?

The next candidate deserves a committee fully present to them.

23. Watch for Scarcity Thinking

After a strong candidate withdraws, committees sometimes begin thinking:

“We will never find anyone this good again.”

“We should have moved faster.”

“Maybe we are asking too much.”

“We need to grab the next good candidate before someone else does.”

Notice the anxiety beneath those thoughts.

Then ask:

Has anything about our actual criteria changed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, why?

Are we changing because we learned something?

Or because we are afraid?

Do not allow disappointment to rewrite your discernment.

24. Do Not Turn the Candidate Into the Perfect Candidate

Once someone withdraws, it is easy to remember only what you liked.

Return to your actual notes.

Strengths we had identified:

Questions we still had:

Concerns we had not resolved:

Things we still did not know:

The candidate who withdrew was still under discernment.

Do not turn possibility into certainty after the fact.

25. Return to Your Commitments

Review **FM 1.1 — Search Team Covenant** and the discernment practices you established at the beginning.

Ask:

What commitments matter particularly now?

How do we want to treat the candidate who withdrew?

How do we want to treat one another?

How do we want to enter the next conversation?

26. A Prayer After Withdrawal

You may want to end the committee's conversation with prayer.

Gracious God,

we give thanks for the person whose story crossed ours for a time.

Bless them as they continue seeking the place where they are called to serve.

Receive our disappointment, our questions, and our hopes.

Give us wisdom to learn what we should learn,
grace to release what we cannot know,
and patience to continue the journey without fear.

Keep us attentive to your Spirit,
faithful to one another,
and open to the people we have not yet met.

Amen.

27. Before Moving Forward

Ask together:

☐ Have we acknowledged our disappointment?
☐ Have we respected the candidate's decision?
☐ Have we maintained confidentiality?
☐ Have we separated facts from assumptions?
☐ Have we listened to any feedback offered?
☐ Have we reviewed our process without becoming defensive?
☐ Have we identified anything that genuinely needs to change?
☐ Have we resisted scarcity thinking?
☐ Have we released this candidate?
☐ Are we ready to meet the next candidate without comparing them to the one who withdrew?

If yes, continue.

If not, spend a little more time here before returning to the search.

Leader's Note

A candidate's withdrawal can feel especially painful when the committee has begun imagining a future with them.

That imagination is part of discernment. You have listened to their stories. They have listened to yours. Possibilities have begun to emerge.

Then the answer is no.

Do not make the no mean more than it means.

It does not necessarily mean the committee failed.

It does not necessarily mean the congregation was rejected.

It does not necessarily mean you missed God's will.

It means mutual discernment did what it must be free to do:

someone recognized that the journey should not continue.

Receive that decision graciously.

Learn what there is to learn.

Release what you cannot know.

Return to the search without desperation.

You are not looking for someone who can be persuaded to accept the call.

You are looking for the person with whom congregation and candidate can eventually say together:

“Yes. We believe God may be calling us into ministry with one another.”

FM 7.2

When the Committee Discerns “No”

Purpose

Not every promising candidate will become your pastor.

Sometimes the committee reaches a point when the answer becomes clear:

We should not continue.

The decision may come quickly. More often, it follows several good conversations with someone the committee respects and genuinely likes.

That can make saying no difficult.

Committees sometimes continue interviewing because they are reluctant to disappoint a candidate, uncertain whether their concerns are significant enough, or hopeful that one more conversation will create certainty.

But mutual discernment requires freedom in both directions.

A faithful **no** is not a judgment on the candidate’s worth, faith, competence, or calling.

It means something more limited:

We do not discern that this particular candidate and this particular congregation should continue toward a call together.

This resource helps the committee recognize when it has reached that point, test its discernment, communicate the decision respectfully, and learn from the process.

1. Name What You Are Sensing

Before voting or reaching a decision, allow committee members to speak individually.

Complete:

At this point, I believe we should:

☐ Continue
☐ Not continue
☐ I am genuinely uncertain

What leads me there?

What have I observed?

What concerns me?

What gives me hope?

Do not begin by trying to persuade one another.
First discover where everyone actually stands.

2. Separate Observation From Interpretation

Return to your interview notes.
Something we observed:

Our interpretation of it:

Another possible interpretation:

Something the candidate actually said:

What we think it means:

Have we tested that interpretation with the candidate?
☐ Yes
☐ No
This distinction matters.
“The candidate did not ask any questions about mission.”
is an observation.
“The candidate doesn't care about mission.”
is an interpretation.
Do not make a consequential decision without knowing the difference.

3. Is This a Question or an Answer?

Some concerns need another conversation.

Others already point toward an answer.

Our concern:

Ask:

Is there information we do not have?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Could another conversation realistically change our understanding?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Is there a direct question we have not asked?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we avoiding that question because it feels uncomfortable?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If another conversation could genuinely affect the committee's discernment, have it.

If not, another interview may simply postpone a decision that is already becoming clear.

4. Have We Asked the Candidate Directly?

Do not reject a candidate because of a question you never gave them an opportunity to answer.

The concern is:

A direct question might be:

Have we asked it?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, what did we hear?

Did the response clarify the concern?

Do not judge candidates by questions they were never asked.

5. Is This About Fit or Competence?

These are different judgments.

Our concern appears primarily related to:

☐ Skills
☐ Experience
☐ Theology
☐ Leadership style
☐ Relational style
☐ Expectations
☐ Vocation
☐ Congregational culture
☐ Practical circumstances
☐ Compatibility between candidate and congregation
☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

Are we concluding that this person cannot do ministry well—or that this particular ministry may not be theirs?

Usually, the committee is discerning the second.

Say only what you actually know.

6. Is This About the Candidate—or About Us?

Sometimes a candidate exposes something in the congregation.

Our concern:

Is the candidate actually presenting a problem?

Or are they asking something of us that makes us uncomfortable?

Are they challenging an assumption we would rather protect?

Are they naming a change we say we want but may not actually be ready to make?

Is our discomfort information about them, about us, or about the relationship between us?

This does not mean every uncomfortable candidate is the right candidate.

It means discomfort deserves interpretation.

7. Are We Rejecting Difference?

A candidate does not need to resemble the committee.

Ask whether your concern is actually about difference.

Is the candidate different from what we expected in:

☐ Personality
☐ Communication style
☐ Age
☐ Background
☐ Leadership style
☐ Career path
☐ Theological emphasis
☐ Worship preferences
☐ Life experience
☐ Other: _____

Does that difference affect their ability to serve faithfully here?

Or does it simply feel unfamiliar?

Do not mistake familiarity for call.

8. Are We Looking for the Previous Pastor?

Complete honestly:

Something we valued about the previous pastor:

Are we expecting the next pastor to provide the same thing?

Something this candidate does differently:

Is that necessarily a weakness?

Are we evaluating the candidate against the ministry ahead or the ministry behind us?

A new call should not be an audition for someone else's role.

9. Are We Looking for an Imaginary Candidate?

Sometimes the candidate is being compared not with another real person but with a composite person who does not exist.

The imaginary candidate:

preaches brilliantly

provides extensive pastoral care

attracts young families

leads mission

manages staff

raises money

handles conflict

loves administration

visits everyone

works well with every personality

changes everything that needs changing

changes nothing anyone values

Ask:

Are our expectations realistic?

Are we rejecting a good candidate because they do not possess every gift we imagined?

Which gifts are actually essential for this call?

Which are desirable but not essential?

Return to the ministry, not the fantasy.

10. Is One Committee Member Driving the Decision?

Strong personalities can influence discernment.

Ask:

Has everyone spoken?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Have quieter members had space?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Is anyone changing their view simply because others feel strongly?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Is one person's concern being treated as decisive without examination?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Is one person's enthusiasm causing concerns to be minimized?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If necessary, go around the table without interruption and hear each person.

Discernment requires more than counting the loudest voices.

11. Is This a Single Concern or a Pattern?

Concern:

We noticed it:
☐ Once
☐ More than once
☐ Across several conversations
☐ In references as well
☐ In several different settings

Other observations connected with it:

Does a pattern appear?

A single awkward answer may be just that;
repeated behavior deserves more attention.

12. What Do the References Tell Us?

If references have been contacted at this stage, ask:

Did references confirm what we observed?

Did they complicate our interpretation?

Did they identify strengths we overlooked?

Did they raise additional questions?

Is there something we should ask the candidate directly?

References provide perspective,
not a substitute for direct conversation with the candidate.

13. Return to the Congregation's Actual Needs

Review the work that preceded the search.

The ministry now requires:

The candidate's gifts appear strongest in:

Where do those connect?

Where do they not?

Is the gap significant enough that partnership would be difficult?

Do not ask whether the candidate is impressive.

Ask whether their vocation and the congregation's vocation appear to meet.

14. Return to the Candidate's Actual Vocation

Listen again to the candidate's stories.

The candidate seems most alive when talking about:

Their strongest gifts appear to be:

The ministry they seem drawn toward is:

Does our congregation offer that ministry?

Would we be asking them to become someone different in order to succeed here?

Sometimes saying no honors the candidate's vocation as well as the congregation's.

15. Consider the Partnership

The question is not only:
"Do we like this candidate?"

Ask:

Can we imagine trusting this person?

Can we imagine being challenged by this person?

Can we imagine sharing leadership?

Can we imagine working through disagreement?

Can we imagine this person loving this congregation?

Can we imagine the congregation receiving this person's gifts?

Can we imagine growing together?

Where does imagination stop?

Pay particular attention to that last question.

16. Name the Reason Clearly

Before deciding no, try to complete this sentence:
"We do not believe we should continue because…"

Can you say it without:
attacking the candidate
making assumptions about motives
using vague language
relying on personality preference
expecting perfection
blaming one interview answer
Our clearest reason is:

If the committee cannot name why it wants to stop, more discernment may be needed.

17. Is the Reason Appropriate?

Ask:

Is our decision based on information relevant to the responsibilities and requirements of the call?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we applying the same standards to every candidate?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we relying on stereotypes or assumptions?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we considering personal information that is not relevant to the call?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we following denominational, presbytery, legal, and confidentiality requirements?
☐ Yes
☐ No

If you are uncertain, seek appropriate guidance before proceeding.

Fairness is part of faithful discernment.

18. What If One Person Still Discerns “Yes”?

Do not immediately force unanimity.

Ask the person who wishes to continue:

What are you seeing that the rest of us may be missing?

Then ask those who wish to stop:

What are you seeing that this person may be weighing differently?

Then ask together:

Is our difference about information we can gather, or about judgment?

If information is missing, seek it.

If the difference is judgment, continue discerning until the committee can make the decision required by its agreed process.

19. What If One Person Still Discerns “No”?

Treat the concern seriously without automatically giving one person veto power unless your committee covenant or process provides for that.

The concern is:

Has it been heard fairly?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Has the candidate had an opportunity to address it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the concern identify a significant issue for partnership?

What would we need before making a decision?

20. Do Not Vote Too Soon

Sometimes the committee needs silence before decision.

Consider:

ending the conversation for the evening

praying

returning the next day

rereading notes

reviewing the congregation's discernment work

allowing anxiety to settle

Ask:

Do we need more information?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Or do we simply need time?

☐ Yes
☐ No

When will we return to the decision?

Delay can serve discernment;

indefinite delay usually does not.

21. When the Answer Becomes Clear

When the committee reaches its decision, state it plainly.

Our decision:

☐ We will continue discernment with this candidate.
☐ We will not continue discernment with this candidate.

The primary reasons are:

What have we learned?

Who will communicate with the candidate?

When?

Do not leave a candidate waiting while the committee avoids an uncomfortable conversation.

22. Tell the Candidate Promptly

Once the decision is made, communicate it.

A personal telephone or video conversation may be appropriate when the candidate has been deeply engaged in the process.

A brief written communication may be appropriate earlier in the search.

The depth of the relationship should shape how you end it.

The essential message is simple:

"Thank you for the time and openness you have shared with us. After careful discernment, our committee has decided not to continue toward a call together. We are grateful for the opportunity to know you and for what you have shared with us. We wish you well as you continue discerning where God is calling you."

Do not bury the decision beneath several minutes of compliments.

Tell them kindly and clearly.

23. Do Not Use God to Avoid Responsibility

Be cautious with:

"God told us you aren't the one."

"God has someone else for us."

"This just isn't God's will."

The committee has discerned and made a decision.

Own it.

Better:

"After prayer, conversation, and careful discernment, we have decided not to continue."

That is both faithful and responsible.

24. If the Candidate Asks Why

They may.

Decide beforehand what you can appropriately say.

Information we can share:

Information that should remain within the committee:

If you offer a reason, make it:

truthful

relevant

respectful

specific enough to be useful

limited to what the committee actually discerned

For example:

"As our conversations continued, we came to believe that the kind of ministry that most energizes you and the leadership needs we identified for this congregation were not as closely aligned as we had hoped."

Do not turn the conversation into a catalogue of deficiencies.

25. If the Candidate Disagrees

They may believe your interpretation is wrong.

Listen.

You can say:

"I appreciate your telling me that."

or:

"Thank you. I can understand why you see it differently."

You do not need to argue your way to agreement.

The purpose of the conversation is to communicate the committee's decision respectfully.

26. If the Candidate Is Hurt or Angry

Allow them to have their response.

Do not defend the committee immediately.

We can say:

“I understand this is disappointing.”

“Thank you for being honest about how you are receiving this.”

“We have valued our conversations, and I am sorry this is painful.”

Do not promise reconsideration unless the committee has actually authorized it.

Kindness does not require ambiguity.

27. Do Not Offer Feedback You Cannot Support

Avoid saying:

“You need more experience.”

“Your preaching isn't strong enough.”

“You aren't warm enough.”

“You would not fit here.”

unless the committee has genuinely established something relevant and has determined that sharing it is appropriate.

Remember:

You have experienced this candidate through a limited process.

You do not possess a complete assessment of their ministry.

Speak modestly.

28. Confidentiality Continues

After the decision:

Who needs to know?

What may be communicated?

What remains confidential?

How will candidate materials be handled?

Do not allow rejection to become permission for committee members to discuss the candidate casually.

The covenant continues after the relationship ends.

29. What Do We Tell Other Candidates?

Nothing about the rejected candidate that they do not need to know.

Do not say:

“We eliminated someone because…”

Do not compare candidates in conversation with one another.

Every candidate deserves their own discernment process.

30. What Did This Candidate Teach Us?

Before moving on, ask:

Something we appreciated:

Something their questions helped us recognize:

Something we understand better about the ministry:

Something we understand better about the kind of partnership we seek:

Something we should carry into future interviews:

A candidate does not need to become your pastor for the conversation to have mattered.

31. Watch What Happens After the Decision

Committees sometimes become much more certain after saying no.

Suddenly:

“I never really liked that answer.”

“There was something about them.”

“They weren't right from the beginning.”

Resist rewriting the story.

What was genuinely promising about this candidate?

What remained unresolved?

What finally led us to stop?

Honor the complexity of the discernment you actually experienced.

32. Do Not Make the Next Candidate the Opposite

If one candidate was highly directive, do not suddenly decide the next candidate must be highly collaborative.

If one lacked administrative experience, do not make administration the defining requirement.

If one theological conversation was difficult, do not build the next interview around avoiding that experience.

Ask:

What did we genuinely learn?

Does anything in our criteria need to change?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, why?

Change criteria because your understanding deepened,

not because one candidate disappointed you.

33. Return to the Search

Before reviewing the next candidate, ask:

Have we released this candidate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we ready to meet someone new without comparison?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are our criteria still clear?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we still listening rather than searching for confirmation?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are we still open to surprise?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Then continue.

34. A Prayer for Releasing a Candidate

Gracious God,

we give thanks for the person whose story we have been privileged to hear.

We are grateful for their gifts, their faith, their questions, and the time they shared with us.

We have discerned that our journeys should not continue toward a call together.

**Give us grace to release them without judgment,
and bless them as they continue seeking the place where their gifts may serve.**

Help us learn what this conversation has taught us.

**Keep us humble about what we know,
faithful in what we decide,
and open to those we have not yet met.**

Amen.

Leader's Note

Saying no is part of the responsibility you accepted when you agreed to serve on the Search Committee.

It should not be casual,

but neither should it be avoided.

The candidate has entrusted you with stories about vocation, ministry, faith, success, disappointment, hope, and perhaps failure. Treat that trust carefully.

Then make the decision you are called to make.

You are not declaring:

This person is not a good pastor.

You are not declaring:

God cannot use this person.

You are not even declaring:

We fully understand this person.

You are saying something much narrower:

We have listened as carefully as we know how, and we do not discern that this candidate and this congregation should continue toward a call together.

That can be a faithful conclusion.

Say it clearly.

Say it kindly.

Protect the candidate's dignity.

Give thanks for what you received from the conversation.

Then release them.

A faithful search depends upon the freedom to recognize both the relationships that should continue and those that should not.

FM 7.3

Processing Disappointment Together

Purpose

Search committees become invested.

You read a candidate's materials, listen to stories, appreciate gifts, and imagine possibilities. Sometimes, without quite realizing it, you begin imagining that person as your pastor.

Then the relationship ends.

The candidate withdraws.

The committee discerns no.

A promising conversation reveals an important incompatibility.

Or circumstances simply change.

Disappointment is a normal part of mutual discernment.

This resource helps the committee acknowledge disappointment without allowing it to distort the search that follows.

The goal is not to get over it quickly, but to:

Receive what happened, learn what can be learned, release the candidate, and become ready to listen again.

1. Begin by Naming What Happened

Do not begin with analysis.

Begin with the event itself.

What happened?

What did we expect would happen?

What are we disappointed about?

What had we begun to imagine?

Sometimes the loss is not simply a candidate;
it is a future the committee had begun imagining.

2. What Are We Feeling?

Committee members may experience the ending differently.

Check what you are feeling.

☐ Disappointed
☐ Sad
☐ Angry
☐ Relieved
☐ Frustrated
☐ Rejected
☐ Confused
☐ Surprised
☐ Discouraged
☐ Anxious
☐ Grateful
☐ Tired
☐ Hopeful
☐ Other: _____

The strongest feeling for me is:

Why?

Do not require everyone to feel the same thing.

3. Let Everyone Speak

Go around the table.

Complete:
“What is hardest for me about this is…”

Listen without correcting.

Then:
"What I will miss about the possibility of this candidate is…"

Then:
"What I am grateful for is…"

No discussion is necessary yet.
Simply hear one another.

4. What Did We Hope For?

Disappointment often reveals hope.
We had begun hoping this candidate might:

We imagined ministry together might look like:

Something about the candidate gave us hope because:

What does that hope tell us about what matters to this congregation?

Do not discard the hope because this particular relationship ended.
The hope may still belong to the search.

5. What Are We Actually Grieving?

Perhaps you are grieving:
☐ The candidate
☐ The possibility of partnership
☐ The time invested

☐ Having to begin again
☐ A sense that the search was nearly finished
☐ A particular gift the candidate brought
☐ The congregation's continuing uncertainty
☐ Fear that another candidate will not emerge
☐ Something else: _____

What feels lost?

Naming the loss helps keep it from resurfacing later as impatience or anxiety.

6. Is Anyone Relieved?

Relief can feel awkward when others are disappointed,
but it is also information.

Did anyone experience relief?
☐ Yes
☐ No

If so, what created the relief?

Was there a concern that had been difficult to name?

What should we learn from that?

Do not shame relief;
listen to it.

7. Resist Blame

Disappointment looks for somewhere to land.

Committees may begin blaming:
the candidate
themselves

another committee member

the presbytery

the congregation

the Terms of Call

the process

God

Before assigning responsibility, ask:

Is someone actually responsible for something that went wrong?

Or are we simply disappointed by an outcome we did not want?

Those are different.

Sometimes no one did anything wrong.

8. Resist Blaming One Another

Committee members may replay decisions:

“We waited too long.”

“We asked the wrong question.”

“We should never have brought that up.”

“If we had moved faster…”

“Someone scared them away.”

Pause.

Is there evidence that something we did caused the outcome?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ We do not know

Are we turning uncertainty into blame?

Is there something we should learn?

Learn without scapegoating.

9. Resist Blaming the Candidate

Avoid turning disappointment into criticism.

Be careful of:

“Maybe they weren't as committed as we thought.”

“They were probably just using us.”

“They must have found a bigger church.”

“Maybe we dodged a bullet.”

“I never really trusted them.”

Ask:

What do we actually know?

What are we inventing because we are hurt?

A candidate does not become a lesser person because the relationship ended.

10. Resist Rewriting the Story

Before the ending, perhaps the committee said:

“They ask wonderful questions.”

Afterward:

“They asked too many questions.”

Before:

“They have strong leadership gifts.”

Afterward:

“They probably would have been controlling.”

Notice the temptation to rewrite the story.

What did we genuinely appreciate?

What genuine questions remained?

What was still unresolved?

Keep the story honest.

11. Resist Idealizing the Candidate

The opposite can happen too.

After a candidate withdraws:
“We will never find anyone like them.”

“They were perfect for us.”

“Everyone else is going to seem disappointing.”

Return to your actual discernment.

Strengths we had recognized:

Questions we still had:

Concerns still unresolved:

Things we still did not know:

The candidate was promising;
that does not mean the outcome had already been determined.

12. Separate the Candidate From the Hope

This distinction matters.

The candidate represented:

Perhaps:
new energy
strong preaching
pastoral warmth
younger leadership
theological depth
mission imagination
administrative competence
stability
change
reconciliation
a fresh beginning
Now ask:
Does that hope disappear because this candidate is no longer part of the search?

Usually, no.
The candidate may have helped you recognize something you are seeking.
Keep the insight;
release the person.

13. What Did We Learn About Our Congregation?

This experience revealed that we care deeply about:

It revealed an expectation we had not fully named:

It revealed a fear:

It revealed a possibility:

It revealed something about the kind of partnership we seek:

Disappointment can clarify vocation.

14. What Did We Learn About the Search?

Something in our process worked well:

Something we might do differently:

Something we should continue doing:

Something we need to examine:

Something we should not change simply because we are disappointed:

Not every painful outcome requires a procedural correction.

15. What Did We Learn From the Candidate?

A question they asked that we should keep asking:

A story they told that stayed with us:

Something they helped us see about ministry:

Something they helped us see about ourselves:

Something they helped us articulate more clearly:

The candidate may leave the process while their contribution to your discernment remains.

16. What Did We Learn About Our Criteria?

Return to the qualities and needs identified earlier in the search.

Did this candidate help us discover that something matters more than we thought?

Less than we thought?

Did we discover a criterion we had not named?

Did we discover that one of our expectations is unrealistic?

Should our criteria change?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Why?

Change your criteria because you learned,

not because you are reacting.

17. Notice Scarcity Thinking

Disappointment can quickly become fear.

Listen for:

“There aren't many good candidates.”

“We may have lost our best chance.”

“We can't afford to let another candidate get away.”

“We should move faster next time.”

“Maybe we need to lower our expectations.”

Ask:

What are we afraid of?

What evidence supports that fear?

What are we tempted to do because of it?

Would that help us discern more faithfully?

Do not let scarcity become your search strategy.

18. Notice Urgency

After disappointment, committees may want to accelerate the next relationship.

Are we tempted to:

☐ Schedule interviews immediately
☐ Move someone forward before we know enough
☐ Avoid difficult questions
☐ Sell the congregation more aggressively
☐ Make an offer quickly
☐ Ignore concerns
☐ Other: _____

Why?

What pace would serve discernment?

Urgency and clarity are not the same thing.

19. Notice Caution

The opposite reaction is also possible:
a committee may become afraid to hope again.

Are we becoming:
☐ More suspicious
☐ More guarded
☐ Less willing to become interested
☐ More demanding
☐ More focused on flaws
☐ Reluctant to trust
☐ Other: _____

What are we protecting ourselves from?

How might that affect the next candidate?

The next candidate should not have to pay for the committee's previous disappointment.

20. Are We Ready to Meet Someone New?

Before the next interview, ask each committee member:

Can I become genuinely curious about another candidate?
☐ Yes
☐ Not yet

Can I listen without comparing them to the person who left?
☐ Yes
☐ Not yet

Can I imagine a different kind of good pastor?

☐ Yes

☐ Not yet

Can I allow myself to hope again?

☐ Yes

☐ Not yet

If several members answer not yet, give yourselves a little time.

21. Watch Comparisons

The next candidate may be:

quieter

older

younger

less polished

more experienced

less experienced

more theological

more practical

more relational

less charismatic

gifted in entirely different ways

Do not ask:

“Are they as good as the candidate we lost?”

Ask:

“Who is this person?”

What would help us enter the next conversation freshly?

22. Return to Curiosity

Before reviewing another candidate, complete:

“We do not yet know…”

“We are curious about…”

“We want to hear the story of…”

Curiosity opens discernment again.

23. Return to the Congregation’s Vocation

The search is larger than any candidate.

What is this congregation called to be and do?

What ministry lies ahead?

What gifts will help that ministry flourish?

Has that vocation changed because one candidate is no longer available?

Usually, the work remains.

Return to it.

24. Remember That Call Is Particular

A candidate can be:

gifted

faithful

experienced

compassionate

an excellent preacher

a strong leader

and still not be called to this congregation.

Likewise, a congregation can be healthy, faithful, and promising and still not be the place where a particular pastor should serve.

What does that distinction help us release?

What does it help us trust?

25. What Do We Need From One Another?

Search committees need care too.

Right now, I need this committee to:

Something that would help us move forward:

Something we should avoid:

Something I appreciate about this committee:

Disappointment can deepen relationships when people are allowed to speak honestly.

26. Give Thanks Before Moving On

Complete together:

We give thanks for:

We are grateful that this candidate helped us:

We are grateful for something we learned about ourselves:

We are grateful for one another because:

Gratitude does not erase disappointment;
it places disappointment inside a larger story.

27. Release What You Cannot Know

There may be unanswered questions.

Something we wish we understood:

Can we obtain an appropriate answer?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, can we release the question?

Complete:

"We may never know…"

"And we can continue without knowing."

28. A Simple Ritual of Release

Place the candidate's name or initials on a piece of paper in the center of the table.

Spend a moment in silence.

Invite committee members, if they wish, to name briefly something for which they are grateful.

Then say together:

We give thanks for the journey we shared.

We release the future we had begun to imagine.

We bless this person for the ministry that lies ahead.

And we return ourselves to the work entrusted to us.

Remove the paper from the table.

Then sit quietly for a moment before continuing.

29. A Prayer for the Committee

Faithful God,

we had begun to hope.

We had begun to imagine possibilities,
and now that particular future will not be ours.

Receive our disappointment without judgment.

Receive our questions, our frustration, our relief, and our sadness.

We give thanks for the person whose story became part of ours for a time.

Bless them in the ministry that lies ahead.

Keep what we have learned.

Release what we cannot know.

Protect us from fear and scarcity.

Keep disappointment from becoming cynicism
and hope from becoming desperation.

Restore our curiosity.

Open us again to people we have not yet met.

And keep us attentive to your Spirit as the journey continues.

Amen.

30. Before Returning to the Search

Ask together:

☐ Have we named what happened?
☐ Have we allowed different emotional responses?
☐ Have we resisted blame?
☐ Have we resisted idealizing the candidate?

☐ Have we resisted diminishing the candidate?
☐ Have we identified what we learned?
☐ Have we separated the person from the hopes they represented?
☐ Have we noticed scarcity or urgency?
☐ Have we released unanswered questions we cannot resolve?
☐ Are we ready to become curious again?
☐ Can we meet the next candidate as a new person?
If yes, return to the search.

If not, do not force it.

A little time here may protect the discernment that comes next.

Leader's Note

Search committees are often surprised by how much disappointment can accompany the end of a candidate relationship.

You have not merely been reviewing résumés.

You have been exchanging stories.

You have heard someone describe what gives their ministry life. They have asked about your congregation's hopes and wounds. Together you may have begun imagining what ministry could become.

That imagination creates attachment.

When the relationship ends, something real is lost.

Honor that.

But do not confuse the loss of one possible future with the loss of the future itself.

The candidate may have awakened a hope that remains important.

They may have helped you recognize gifts your congregation needs.

They may have asked a question you should never stop asking.

Keep those things.

release the person.

Then, when you are ready, return to the search with curiosity.

The next candidate does not need to resemble the one you lost.

They need the opportunity to tell their own story,

and the committee needs to be ready to hear it.

FM 7.4

Sample Candidate Communications

Purpose

How a Search Committee communicates with candidates is part of the discernment process.

Candidates notice whether communication is timely, clear, personal, and respectful. They notice long silences, institutional form letters, and whether a committee communicates with the same hospitality it hopes a pastor will bring to ministry.

This resource provides sample language for common points in the search.

These are not scripts to copy word for word.

Adapt them.

Sound like yourselves.

As the relationship becomes significant, choose personal conversation over email when possible.

A useful principle is:

The deeper the relationship, the more personal the communication should become.

1. Acknowledging Receipt of Candidate Materials

Send this promptly.

Send

Recipients

Thank You for Your Interest

Thank you for your interest in serving with our congregation. We have received your materials and look forward to reading them carefully.

Our Search Committee is currently reviewing candidates, and we expect to be in touch within [timeframe] regarding next steps.

We appreciate the time and thought you have invested in your materials and in considering ministry with us.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

The important information is not the wording.

It is the timeframe.

If you say you will respond within two weeks, respond within two weeks.

2. Inviting a Candidate to a First Conversation

Keep the invitation warm and uncomplicated.

Send

Recipients

Invitation to Conversation

Thank you for allowing us to learn more about your ministry through the materials you shared with us. Our committee would enjoy getting to know you better and would like to invite you to an initial conversation by Zoom.

We anticipate about [length] for the conversation. We will spend some time introducing ourselves and our congregation, invite you to tell us more about your ministry and vocation, and leave plenty of time for your questions.

Would any of these times work for you?

[Option]

[Option]

[Option]

Once we have a time, we will send the Zoom information and the names of the committee members who will be participating.

We look forward to the conversation.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

3. Confirming the First Interview

Candidates should know what to expect.

Send

Recipients

Our Upcoming Conversation

We are looking forward to our conversation on [date] at [time].

Here is the Zoom link:

[Zoom information]

We expect the conversation to last approximately [length].

You will be meeting with [names or Search Committee]. We will begin with introductions, spend most of our time in conversation about ministry and the life of our congregation, and make sure there is time for questions you would like to ask us.

You do not need to prepare a presentation. We are looking forward simply to getting to know one another.

If anything changes before then, please let us know.

We look forward to seeing you.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

That final reassurance can matter.

This is a conversation, not an audition.

4. Thanking a Candidate After the First Interview

Do not leave the candidate wondering what happens next.

Send

Recipients

Thank You for Our Conversation

Thank you for the conversation with us [yesterday/this week]. We appreciated the opportunity to hear more of your story and ministry and to respond to some of your questions about our congregation.

Our committee will be meeting again on [date/timeframe] to continue our discernment. We expect to contact you by [date] about next steps.

In the meantime, if our conversation raised additional questions for you, please feel free to send them to us.

Thank you again for the openness you brought to our conversation.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

5. When the Committee Needs More Time

Silence creates unnecessary anxiety.

If the process is taking longer than expected, say so.

Send

Recipients

An Update From Our Search Committee

We wanted to give you a brief update rather than leave you wondering about our process.

Our committee is continuing its discernment and needs a little more time than we originally anticipated. We expect to know more about our next steps by [date].

Our need for additional time is about our process, and we did not want our silence to suggest otherwise.

We appreciate your patience and your continued interest in conversation with us. If anything changes in your own discernment in the meantime, please feel free to let us know.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

Do not say **"soon."**

Give a date whenever possible.

6. Inviting a Candidate to a Second Interview

By this point, the relationship is deepening. Let the communication reflect that.

Send

Recipients

Continuing Our Conversation

Our committee has appreciated getting to know you, and we would like to continue our mutual discernment with another conversation.

In this next conversation, we hope to explore more deeply [ministry leadership/theology/mission/congregational life/other areas], as well as questions that have emerged for both you and us since we last talked.

We would also like to make significant time for questions you want to explore with us.

Would one of these times work?

[Option]

[Option]

[Option]

We expect the conversation to last approximately [length].

We are grateful for the openness of our conversations so far and look forward to continuing them.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

7. Sending Material Before an Interview

Do not overwhelm candidates with documents.

Send what will actually help the next conversation.

Send

Recipients

Materials for Our Next Conversation

As we prepare for our next conversation, we thought these materials might help you learn more about our congregation and ministry:

[List materials or links]

There is no expectation that you study everything in detail. We simply want you to have access to information that may help your own discernment and raise questions you would like to explore with us.

We look forward to continuing the conversation on [date].

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

8. Asking a Candidate for Additional Information

Be clear about why you are asking.

Send

Recipients

A Follow-Up to Our Conversation

Thank you again for our recent conversation. As our committee reflected on what we heard, one area emerged that we would like to understand more fully.

Would you be willing to tell us more about [question/topic]?

We are not looking for a particular answer. We realized that we did not explore this area as fully as we would like, and we want to understand your experience more clearly as our discernment continues.

You are welcome to respond by email, or we would be glad to arrange a brief conversation if that would be easier.

Thank you,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

9. Asking Permission to Contact References

Follow the procedures required by your presbytery or governing body.

When permission is appropriate:

Send

Recipients

Reference Conversations

As our conversations continue, we have reached the point where we would like to speak with your references.

Before doing so, we wanted to let you know and confirm that you are comfortable with us contacting the people you have provided.

If there is anything we should know about timing or the best way to reach them, please let us know.

We appreciate your continued openness in this process.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

10. Inviting a Candidate to an In-Person Visit

By this point, communication should be personal.

Send

Recipients

Invitation to Visit

Our conversations have deepened our interest in continuing discernment with you, and we would like to invite you to visit us in person.

We hope the visit will give you an opportunity not only to spend more time with the Search Committee but also to experience our community, learn more about the congregation and its ministry, and continue asking the questions you need to ask.

We are considering [dates].

We would provide [travel/lodging/meals/transportation arrangements as appropriate] and will work with you on the details.

Before making plans, we would be glad to talk about the visit and anything you would particularly want or need to experience while you are here.

We are grateful for the relationship that has begun to develop and look forward to exploring what comes next.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

11. Sending an In-Person Visit Schedule

Do not make every minute an evaluation.

Candidates need space to breathe, think, and talk privately with family or others important to their discernment.

Send

Recipients

Schedule for Your Visit

We are looking forward to welcoming you on [dates].

We have attached/included a tentative schedule for the visit.

[Schedule]

We have intentionally left some unscheduled time so that you can rest, explore the community, and have space for your own reflection.

Please look over the schedule and tell us if there is anything you would like to add, change, or have more time to explore.

We want this visit to serve your discernment as much as ours.

Safe travels, and we look forward to welcoming you.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

12. When the Candidate Withdraws

Once the relationship has progressed beyond an early exchange of materials, respond personally.

Send

Recipients

With Gratitude

Thank you for letting us know.

We are disappointed because we have valued getting to know you, but we respect your discernment and are grateful for the conversations we have shared.

Thank you for the openness with which you shared your ministry, questions, and hopes with us. Our conversations with you have contributed to our own discernment as a committee.

We wish you grace and wisdom as you continue seeking the place where your gifts and calling may serve.

With gratitude,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

If the candidate has been deeply involved in the process, call first.

Then use the email only as a gracious follow-up.

See **FM 7.1 — When a Candidate Withdraws**.

13. When the Committee Discerns "No" Early in the Process

A short, respectful communication is sufficient.

Send

Recipients

Our Search Process

Thank you for your interest in serving with our congregation and for allowing us to learn about your ministry.

After reviewing your materials and continuing our discernment, we have decided not to move forward toward an interview.

We are grateful for the time you invested in considering ministry with us and wish you well as you continue discerning your next call.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

Do not say:

"We found candidates who were a better fit."

The candidate does not need to know where they ranked.

14. When the Committee Discerns "No" After an Interview

The relationship deserves greater acknowledgment.

Send

Recipients

With Thanks for Our Conversation

Thank you again for the time and openness you shared in conversation with our committee.

After careful reflection and discernment, we have decided not to continue toward a call together.

We are grateful for the opportunity to hear your story, learn about your ministry, and explore some of the questions that matter to both you and our congregation.

We recognize the vulnerability involved in entering conversations like these and appreciate the trust you extended to us.

We wish you well as you continue discerning where God is calling you to serve.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

See **FM 7.2 — When the Committee Discerns "No."**

15. When the Committee Discerns "No" After Several Conversations

At this point, call.

Do not end a significant relationship with a form email unless conversation is impossible.

A possible beginning:

"Thank you for making time to talk. I wanted to speak with you personally because we have valued the relationship that has developed through our conversations. After careful discernment, the committee has decided that we should not continue toward a call together."

Then stop.

Allow the candidate to respond.

You may continue:

"We are genuinely grateful for what you have shared with us. This decision is about our discernment of this particular call, not a judgment about your ministry or gifts."

If they ask why, respond honestly within the boundaries the committee established.

Afterward, send a brief personal note.

Send

Recipients

Thank You

Thank you for talking with me today.

I know this was not an easy conversation, and I want to express again the committee's gratitude for the time, trust, and openness you have shared with us.

We are grateful that our journeys crossed during this season of discernment and wish you every blessing as yours continues.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

16. When a Candidate Asks for Feedback

Feedback should be modest.

You have experienced the candidate only within the limits of your search.

Send

Recipients

Following Up

Thank you for asking.

I want to be careful not to offer a broad evaluation of your ministry based on the limited context in which we have known you.

What I can share is that, as our committee continued its discernment, we became less certain that [brief, appropriate description of the area of alignment] matched what we currently understand this congregation to need.

That is a judgment about this particular call rather than a judgment about your overall gifts or ministry.

I hope that distinction is helpful, and we are grateful for the conversations we shared.

Grace and peace,

[Name]

Do not manufacture feedback because the candidate asks for it.

If there is nothing useful or appropriate to offer, say so.

17. Checking In During a Long Process

Candidates have lives and other searches.

Stay connected.

Send

Recipients

A Brief Search Update

We wanted to stay in touch as our process continues.

Our committee remains engaged in discernment and expects our next significant conversation to occur around [timeframe].

We know that you are also engaged in your own discernment and may be having conversations with other congregations. If anything changes for you that affects our process together, please feel free to let us know.

We will do the same.

Thank you for continuing the conversation with us.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

That last exchange is important.

Mutual discernment includes mutual communication.

18. When the Committee's Timeline Changes

Send

Recipients

An Update on Our Timeline

When we last spoke, we expected to [next step] by [date].

Our timeline has changed because [brief explanation if appropriate], and we now expect to reach that point by [new date].

We wanted to tell you promptly rather than leave you wondering.

We apologize for the change and appreciate your flexibility. Please let us know if the revised timing creates any difficulty for your own discernment.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

19. When You Need to Ask About the Candidate's Timeline

Do not assume you are the only congregation in conversation with them.

Send

Recipients

Checking in About Timing

As our conversations continue, we would like to make sure we understand your own discernment timeline.

We recognize that you may be in conversation with other congregations or have other considerations affecting your decisions.

Is there anything about your current timeline that would be helpful for our committee to know?

We are not asking for details about other searches. We simply want to communicate responsibly as we continue discerning together.

Thank you,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

20. When a Candidate Says Another Search Is Moving Quickly

Do not panic.

Do not manufacture urgency.

A possible response:

“Thank you for telling us. We appreciate knowing that. We will talk as a committee about our own process and let you know promptly what we can realistically do. We don't want to slow your discernment unnecessarily, and we also don't want to promise a timeline we cannot honor.”

Then communicate again when you said you would.

21. When the Committee Wants to Continue but Is Not Ready for the Next Major Step

Be transparent.

Send

Recipients

Continuing Our Discernment

Our committee continues to value our conversations with you and would like to remain in discernment together.

We are not yet ready to move to [next stage], and we want to be transparent about that rather than leave you uncertain about our interest.

We expect to spend the next [timeframe] on [brief description if appropriate] and will contact you again by [date].

We understand that your own discernment continues during that time. Please let us know if your circumstances or timeline change.

We are grateful for the conversation we are sharing.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

22. When the Committee Is Ready to Discuss Terms of Call

Do not make compensation conversation feel like an embarrassing interruption of spiritual discernment.

It is part of discernment.

Send

Recipients

Conversation About Terms of Call

As our discernment has deepened, we believe it is time to have a more detailed conversation about the Terms of Call.

We would like to make sure you understand what the congregation is prepared to offer and that we understand any questions or practical considerations that are important to you.

We hope this can be an open conversation. Compensation, housing, benefits, time away, continuing education, moving expenses, and family considerations are all legitimate parts of discerning whether a call can be lived faithfully.

Could we schedule a conversation on [options]?

We look forward to continuing our discernment together.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

23. When You Are Approaching a Call

The language should change.

You are no longer simply interested.

You are beginning to name what you believe may be happening.

Send

Recipients

Continuing Toward a Call

Through our conversations, prayer, and discernment, our committee has increasingly come to believe that God may be calling us into ministry together.

We would like to continue toward the next steps in that discernment, including [Terms of Call/candidating visit/presbytery requirements/other steps].

We know that you must discern this call as fully as we do, and we want to make sure you have the information, conversations, and time you need.

Could we schedule a conversation to talk about what remains for each of us before moving forward?

We are grateful for the relationship that has grown through this process and look forward to the conversation ahead.

Grace and peace,

[Name]
for the Search Committee

24. Communicating a Call

Follow all required congregational and presbytery procedures.

When the committee has reached the appropriate point, the communication should be direct.

"After prayer, conversation, and careful discernment, our Search Committee believes God is calling us to ministry together. We would like to invite you to become our candidate for the position of [title], subject to the required congregational and presbytery processes."

Then allow the candidate to respond.

Do not rush to fill the silence.

This is one of the moments for which the entire search has been preparing.

25. A Communication the Committee Should Never Send

Avoid messages like:

"Just checking to see if you're still interested."

when the committee has been silent for three weeks.

Instead, take responsibility:

"We realize it has been longer than we intended since our last communication, and we apologize. Our committee is still discerning and should have updated you sooner."

Candidates should not carry the burden of poor committee communication.

26. Avoid These Phrases

Be cautious with:

"You're still in the running."

This sounds like a competition.

“You're one of our finalists.”

Sometimes procedurally necessary, but use thoughtfully.

“You are our first choice.”

Do not say this unless the committee is actually prepared to act on it.

“We think you're the one.”

Discernment is not finished simply because enthusiasm is high.

“God told us…”

Own the committee’s discernment.

“We're sure you'll find the right church.”

You cannot know that.

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Do not explain someone else's disappointment.

“It wasn't a good fit.”

If that is all you say after a deep process, it can sound dismissive.

27. Communication Responsibilities

Decide early who communicates with candidates.

Primary candidate contact:

Backup:

Who schedules interviews?

Who sends materials?

Who communicates decisions?

Who follows up after significant conversations?

Whenever possible, let candidates hear from a consistent person.

Relationship matters.

28. Before Sending Any Candidate Communication

Ask:

☐ Is it clear why we are writing?
☐ Does the candidate know what happens next?
☐ Have we given a realistic timeframe?
☐ Does the message sound like human beings rather than an institution?
☐ Are we saying more than confidentiality allows?
☐ Are we making promises we cannot keep?
☐ Are we communicating genuine interest without implying a decision we have not made?
☐ Is email the appropriate medium at this stage of the relationship?
☐ Would we be comfortable receiving this message ourselves?
If yes, send it.

29. The Twenty-Four-Hour Principle

After a significant interview or conversation, candidates should generally not wonder whether you received them well.

Whenever possible, send a brief acknowledgment within twenty-four hours.

It need not communicate a decision.

It simply says:

We appreciated the conversation. Here is what happens next.

That small act communicates attentiveness and respect.

30. The No-Silence Principle

At every stage, a candidate should know one of three things:

What happens next.

When they will hear from you.

or

Why the timeline has changed.

If none of those is true, communicate.

Silence is also communication.

It usually communicates something you did not intend.

31. Match the Medium to the Relationship

Email is usually sufficient for:

acknowledging materials

scheduling

providing information

early-stage decisions

routine updates

A telephone or video conversation is usually better for:

significant concerns

a candidate withdrawing after deep engagement

the committee ending a significant candidacy

Terms of Call conversations

important changes in direction

approaching a call

extending an invitation toward a call

Ask:

How much of this person's story have they entrusted to us?

The more substantial the relationship, the less appropriate a form email becomes.

32. Remember What the Communication Is For

Candidate communication is not public relations.

You do not need to keep every candidate enthusiastic.

You do not need to sell the congregation.

You do not need to make difficult news sound pleasant.

You need to communicate:

clearly

promptly

honestly

respectfully

confidentially

and

humanly.

That is enough.

Leader's Note

Candidates will learn something about your congregation from every communication they receive.

A prompt acknowledgment says:
We noticed you.

A clear timeline says:
We respect your time.

An honest update says:
You do not have to guess what is happening.

A personal conversation after several interviews says:
You became more to us than a résumé.

A gracious no says:
Your dignity does not depend upon our decision.

And a willingness to answer the candidate's questions says:
This discernment belongs to both of us.

You do not need eloquent correspondence.

You need faithful communication.

Say what you know.

Say what happens next.

Say when you will communicate again.

And when the relationship becomes personal, let the communication become personal too.

FM 7.5

Prayer of Release

Purpose

Discernment sometimes ends with a no.

A candidate withdraws. The committee decides not to continue. A relationship that had begun to carry hope comes to an end.

There is practical work to do when that happens: communication, confidentiality, record keeping, and decisions about what comes next.

There is also spiritual work.

The committee has been praying for a person it has come to know, hearing stories of calling, family, ministry, disappointment, and hope. Members may have begun imagining this person as their pastor.

When the relationship ends, it can help to mark that ending intentionally.

A Prayer of Release gives the committee a way to:

give thanks for the candidate

acknowledge disappointment

release the future it had begun to imagine

entrust the candidate's continuing journey to God

receive what the committee has learned

return to the search with openness

This is not a prayer for deciding whether to continue.

Use it after the decision has been made.

1. Prepare for the Prayer

Do not move immediately from the decision to the next candidate.

Set aside a few minutes.

Place the candidate's name or initials on a piece of paper in the center of the table.

The chair may say:

We have shared part of the journey with this person. Before we continue our search, let us give thanks for what we have received and release this relationship with grace.

Allow a brief silence.

2. Name What You Are Releasing

Invite each committee member, if they wish, to complete one of these sentences:

I give thanks for…

or

I will remember…

or

This candidate helped me recognize…

or

I had begun hoping…

Do not discuss the responses.

Simply receive them.

3. Prayer of Release

The leader begins:

Faithful God,

you have accompanied us through every conversation,
every question,

every hope,
and every uncertainty.

For a time, our journey crossed the journey of this candidate.

We give thanks for the stories entrusted to us,
for the questions we were invited to consider,
for the gifts we were privileged to recognize,
and for everything we learned through our conversations.

Silence.

We had begun to imagine possibilities.

Some of us had begun to hope that this might become a call.

Others may have carried questions or concerns.

Now this part of the journey has ended.

Receive whatever we bring to that ending:
gratitude, disappointment, relief, sadness, uncertainty, or peace.

Silence.

We release this candidate from our discernment.

We release the future we may have begun imagining together.

We release the questions we may never answer.

We release our need to know what comes next for them.

Their journey is no longer ours to direct.

Bless them in the ministry that lies ahead.

Guide them toward the people and place where their gifts may flourish.

Give them companions for the journey,
wisdom for the decisions ahead,
and courage to follow where you lead.

Silence.

And now turn our attention again toward the work you have entrusted to us.

Keep what we have learned.

Release what we no longer need to carry.

Protect us from scarcity and fear.

Keep us from comparing the people we have not yet met
with the person we are releasing today.

Restore our curiosity.

Renew our patience.

Deepen our trust in one another.

And make us ready again to listen.

Silence.

We do not know who will next sit across the table from us.

**We do not know what stories we will hear
or what possibilities we will discover.**

**But we trust that your Spirit is already at work—
in this congregation,
in those who are discerning their own calls,
and in the conversations still ahead.**

**So we release what has ended
and receive again the journey before us.**

Amen.

4. A Shorter Prayer

When a shorter prayer is appropriate:

Gracious God,

we give thanks for the person whose journey crossed ours for a time.

**We are grateful for what they shared,
for what we learned,
and for the possibilities we were able to imagine together.**

Now we release them from our discernment.

Bless them as their journey continues.

**Help us keep what we have learned
and release what is no longer ours to carry.**

Free us from disappointment, fear, and comparison.

**Restore our curiosity
and make us ready to receive the people we have not yet met.**

Guide us as the search continues.

Amen.

5. When the Candidate Withdrew

When the candidate made the decision, the committee may want to use this version:

God of every calling,

we give thanks for the person we have come to know through this search.

**We had hoped our conversations might continue,
and we receive their decision with both disappointment and respect.**

We bless them as they continue their discernment.

May they find clarity, courage, and companions for the journey ahead.

Keep us from turning their decision into judgment of them or of ourselves.

**Help us learn what there is to learn
and release what we cannot know.**

Return us to our work with patience, hope, and curiosity.

Amen.

6. When the Committee Discerned "No"

When the committee made the decision:

God of wisdom and grace,

you know both this congregation and the candidate whose story we have heard.

We give thanks for their gifts, their faith, and the trust with which they entered this conversation.

**After listening, praying, questioning, and discerning,
we have decided that our journeys should not continue toward a call together.**

Keep us humble about that decision.

**We do not claim to know the whole of this person's calling.
We know only the decision entrusted to us.**

Bless them for the ministry that lies ahead.

**Help us release them without judgment
and remember them with gratitude.**

**Carry forward what we have learned
and prepare us for the conversations still to come.**

Amen.

7. A Responsive Prayer

This version may be especially useful when the committee has traveled a considerable distance with a candidate.

Leader:
For the person whose story became part of ours,

Committee:

We give thanks.

Leader:
For the gifts we recognized and the questions we shared,

Committee:

We give thanks.

Leader:
For the hopes we began to imagine,

Committee:

We give thanks.

Leader:
For what we learned about ministry, about our congregation, and about ourselves,

Committee:

We give thanks.

Leader:
For the future we imagined that will not become ours,

Committee:

We release it.

Leader:
For questions that may remain unanswered,

Committee:

We release them.

Leader:
For disappointment, regret, or fear that could keep us from listening again,

Committee:

We release them.

Leader:
For the candidate and the journey that lies ahead,

Committee:

We ask your blessing.

Leader:
For our congregation and the ministry entrusted to it,

Committee:

Renew our hope.

Leader:
For the people whose stories we have not yet heard,

Committee:

Restore our curiosity.

Leader:
For the journey that continues,

Committee:

Guide us by your Spirit.

All:

What has ended, we release.

What we have learned, we receive.

What lies ahead, we entrust to God.

Amen.

8. A Simple Act of Release

After the prayer, the chair may remove the candidate's name from the center of the table.

Do this quietly.

Do not tear it up dramatically or make the action symbolic of rejection.

Simply remove it.

Then place the committee's Search Team Covenant, Ministry Discernment Profile, or another document representing the continuing search in the center of the table.

The leader may say:

This relationship has ended. Our calling as a Search Committee continues.

Pause briefly.

Then continue with the meeting—or end the meeting there.

Sometimes ending there is the wiser choice.

9. Before Moving On

Ask only:

What do we want to carry forward from this relationship?

What do we need to leave here?

Are we ready to become curious again?

☐ Yes

☐ Not yet

Do not force a yes.

Leader's Note

Release is different from forgetting.

The candidate may have helped the committee understand something important about its congregation. A question may remain with you. A story may have clarified what kind of ministry is needed. A gift you recognized may help you recognize that gift when it appears differently in someone else.

Keep what serves the discernment.

Release the person.

That distinction matters.

Once the relationship has ended, the candidate is not yours to continue evaluating. Their future is not yours to predict, nor their calling yours to determine.

Bless them.

Then turn again toward the work entrusted to you.

There are stories you have not yet heard.

There are questions no one has yet asked.

There are people you have not yet met.

What has ended, release.
What you have learned, receive.
What lies ahead, trust to God.

Chapter Eight — The Interview Weekend

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 8.1

Interview Weekend Planner

Purpose

An interview weekend is a significant step in mutual discernment.

By this point, committee and candidate have already shared substantial conversations. The weekend allows both to experience what Zoom cannot reveal: the community, congregational life, informal conversation, worship, relationships, and what it might actually feel like to live and minister together.

The temptation is to fill every available hour.

Resist it.

A good interview weekend provides enough structure for meaningful encounters and enough space for the candidate to notice, reflect, ask questions, explore the community, and breathe.

Remember:

The candidate is not coming only to be interviewed. The candidate is coming to discern.

Use this planner to design a weekend that serves both purposes.

1. Begin With the Purpose

Before creating a schedule, ask:

What do we still need to learn about the candidate?

What does the candidate still need to learn about us?

What can happen in person that could not happen through Zoom?

What decisions might follow this weekend?

What should not be decided yet?

Complete:

The primary purpose of this weekend is to…

2. What Kind of Weekend Is This?

Clarify the stage of the process.

☐ Confidential interview weekend
☐ Final candidate visit
☐ Candidating weekend
☐ Weekend including congregational interaction
☐ Weekend including worship leadership
☐ Other: _____

Who knows the candidate is visiting?

Who may meet the candidate?

What confidentiality requirements apply?

Be especially careful when the candidate is currently serving another congregation.

3. Candidate Information

Candidate:

Spouse/partner or family accompanying:

Arrival date:

Arrival time:

Arrival location:

Departure date:

Departure time:

Departure location:

Candidate's preferred contact during the weekend:

Committee contact:

Backup contact:

4. Ask Before You Plan

Do not design the entire weekend and then present it to the candidate. Ask first.

Is there anything you particularly want to experience while you are here?

Are there people you would especially like to meet?

Are there parts of the community you would like to explore?

Are there questions you hope the weekend will help answer?

Would you like time to explore housing?

Schools?

Employment possibilities for a spouse or partner?

Recreation or community life?

Other:

The candidate's agenda belongs in the weekend too.

5. Travel Arrangements

Transportation:

☐ Candidate driving
☐ Air travel
☐ Train
☐ Rental car
☐ Committee transportation
☐ Other: _____

Reservations confirmed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Confirmation information sent to candidate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Who meets the candidate?

Where?

Candidate has contact number?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Return transportation arranged?

☐ Yes
☐ No

6. Expenses

Do not make the candidate wonder which expenses they are expected to absorb.

Congregation will cover:

☐ Airfare
☐ Mileage
☐ Rental car
☐ Lodging
☐ Meals
☐ Parking
☐ Tolls
☐ Family travel
☐ Childcare

☐ Other: _____

How will expenses be handled?

☐ Congregation pays directly
☐ Candidate submits receipts
☐ Mileage reimbursement
☐ Other: _____

Candidate has received instructions?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Person responsible for reimbursement:

Expected reimbursement timeline:

7. Lodging

Lodging:

Address:

Confirmation:

Check-in:

Check-out:

Candidate has details?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Whenever possible, provide private lodging.

Hospitality does not require placing the candidate in a committee member's guest room. Privacy may be the greater hospitality.

8. Transportation During the Weekend

Candidate will:

☐ Have own vehicle
☐ Have rental car

☐ Be transported by committee members
☐ Combination

Who is responsible for transportation?

Does the candidate have:
☐ Church address
☐ Hotel address
☐ Committee contact numbers
☐ Schedule
☐ Directions
☐ Parking instructions

Avoid making the candidate dependent upon committee members for every movement.

Some independence creates useful space.

9. Build the Weekend Around Conversations, Not Events

List the conversations that actually matter.

We need meaningful time with:
☐ Search Committee
☐ Pastor/head of staff
☐ Session
☐ Staff
☐ Ministry leaders
☐ Presbytery representative
☐ Community leaders
☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

Which are essential?

Which would simply be nice?

Which could happen later?

Do not turn the weekend into a receiving line.

10. Friday — Arrival

Arrival:

Who welcomes the candidate?

First activity:

Dinner:

Participants:

Purpose:

Keep the first evening relatively light.
The candidate may have traveled all day.
Do not schedule a three-hour interview over dinner.

11. Friday Evening Conversation

If a conversation is planned:
Time:

Location:

Participants:

Purpose:

Topics:

Candidate questions we want to make room for:

End time:

Honor it.

12. Saturday Morning

Breakfast:

Morning activity:

Participants:

Purpose:

Possible uses include:

☐ Search Committee conversation
☐ Community tour
☐ Staff conversation
☐ Mission-site visits
☐ Neighborhood exploration
☐ Housing exploration
☐ Candidate's personal time
☐ Other: _____

What do we hope this part of the weekend makes possible?

13. The Community Tour

Do not simply drive past buildings.

Help the candidate understand the place.

Consider:

☐ Neighborhoods
☐ Schools
☐ Downtown
☐ Hospitals
☐ Major employers
☐ Universities or colleges
☐ Parks and recreation
☐ Housing
☐ Areas experiencing growth
☐ Areas experiencing economic stress
☐ Community ministries

☐ Partner organizations
☐ Places where members live
☐ Other: _____

Who should lead the tour?

Why this person?

What stories should be told?

What should the candidate have time simply to notice?
A community tour is not a sales tour. Let the candidate see the actual community.

14. Show the Whole Community

Every community has beauty and difficulty.

Places we are proud of:

Places experiencing challenge:

Community changes underway:

Needs the congregation is noticing:

Places where we see possibility:
Do not show only the attractive neighborhoods. A pastor is called to a place, not a brochure.

15. Meeting the Staff

If appropriate at this stage:

Time:

Participants:

Location:

Purpose:

What should staff know about confidentiality?

What does the candidate need to learn?

What do staff need opportunity to ask?

Avoid asking staff to evaluate the candidate unless your process explicitly calls for that.
Let the meeting be relational and informative.

16. Meeting Congregational Leaders

Participants:

Why these people?

What perspective can they provide?

What should the candidate be able to ask them?

Do not assemble only the congregation's biggest enthusiasts.
The candidate needs trustworthy witnesses, not a marketing team.

17. Mission and Community Partners

If mission is central to the congregation's identity, let the candidate encounter it.

Ministry or partner:

Person to meet:

What the candidate might learn:

Why this matters for discernment:
Sometimes fifteen minutes with a community partner reveals more than an hour of committee explanation.

18. Saturday Lunch

Location:

Participants:

Purpose:

Not every meal needs an agenda.

Consider intentionally making one meal simply:

Lunch.
Candidates need ordinary conversation too.

19. Saturday Afternoon — Deeper Conversation

This may be the central committee conversation of the weekend.

Time:

Location:

Participants:

Length:

Areas we still need to explore:

Questions arising from previous interviews:

Questions arising during the visit:

What does the candidate need to explore with us?

Leave substantial time for their questions.

20. Do We Need Another Formal Interview?

Ask before scheduling one.

Is there genuinely new ground to explore?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Or are we repeating earlier interviews because it feels safer than having deeper conversation?

By this stage, the conversation should increasingly sound like:

Could we imagine ministry together?

rather than:

Can you prove again that you are qualified?

21. Saturday Personal Time

Schedule it.

Do not write “Free time if available.” Make it available.

Personal time:

From _____ to _____

The candidate may use this time to:

rest

pray

walk

explore

talk privately with family

visit neighborhoods

make phone calls

write notes

do absolutely nothing

No committee member needs to know which.

22. If a Spouse, Partner, or Family Accompanies the Candidate

They are not additional candidates. Ask what would be helpful to them.

They would like information about:

☐ Housing
☐ Employment
☐ Schools
☐ Childcare
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Community organizations
☐ Other: _____

Who can provide information without evaluating them?

What time will the family have privately?

Never interview the spouse or partner indirectly through hospitality.

23. Saturday Evening

Dinner:

Participants:

Purpose:

Consider whether the evening should be:

☐ Search Committee dinner
☐ Small informal gathering
☐ Dinner with congregational leaders
☐ Dinner with staff
☐ Candidate/family evening alone
☐ Other: _____

End time:

A candidate who has been "on" since breakfast is tired. Hospitality includes knowing when to go home.

24. Sunday Morning

Clarify exactly what Sunday means at this stage.

Candidate will:

☐ Worship anonymously
☐ Observe worship
☐ Meet members informally
☐ Participate in worship
☐ Preach
☐ Lead another part of worship
☐ Attend a class
☐ Other: _____

Confidentiality considerations:

Who needs to know who the candidate is?

Who should not?

Follow all presbytery and denominational procedures regarding candidating and preaching.

25. If the Candidate Worships Anonymously

Plan carefully.

Where will they sit?

Who will accompany them?

How will introductions be handled?

What if someone asks who they are?

How will confidentiality be protected?

Do not make anonymity so elaborate that it draws attention to itself.

26. If the Candidate Preaches

Clarify beforehand:

Scripture:

Who chooses it?

Worship theme:

Service time:

Candidate responsibilities:

Other worship leaders:

Technology information sent?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Order of worship sent?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Deadline for sermon title/materials:

Who communicates worship details?

Do not surprise the candidate with liturgical expectations on Saturday night.

27. Do Not Turn Worship Into an Audition

If the candidate preaches, remember:

One sermon is still only one sermon.

Afterward, avoid immediately asking:

"What did everyone think?"

Instead ask:

What did we hear?

What did we notice?

What questions arose?

How does this connect with what we have already learned?

Evaluate within the whole discernment process.

28. Sunday Lunch

Time:

Location:

Participants:

Purpose:

If this follows worship, allow the candidate time to come down from leading or preaching before beginning another major interview.

29. Final Committee Conversation

Before the candidate leaves, provide an intentional closing conversation.

Time:

Location:

Participants:

Begin with the candidate.

Ask:

What have you noticed this weekend?

What surprised you?

What questions have emerged?

What would you still need to understand as your discernment continues?

Notes:

Then share anything the committee needs the candidate to understand.

30. Do Not Demand a Decision

At the end of an intense weekend, do not ask, “So, are you interested?” Instead say, “We hope you will take some time to reflect on the weekend. We will do the same.”

Both candidate and committee need space after the experience.

31. Clarify What Happens Next

Before the candidate leaves, make sure everyone knows:

Committee will meet:

Candidate will have time to reflect until:

Next communication:

Who will initiate it?

Expected date:
Do not end a significant weekend with “We'll be in touch.”

32. Candidate's Questions Still Unanswered

Before departure, ask:

Is there anything you wanted to learn this weekend that you did not get to explore?

Unanswered questions:

Who will follow up?

By when?

33. Departure

Departure time:

Transportation:

Who assists?

Candidate has:
☐ Travel information
☐ Receipts/instructions
☐ Contact information
☐ Next-step timeline
☐ Any requested materials
Do not conduct one final interview on the way to the airport. Let the journey end graciously.

34. Committee Debrief

Do not begin the formal debrief while half the committee is still driving home.

Schedule it.

Debrief date:

Time:

Location:

Before the meeting, ask members to review their notes.

Use:

FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews

and the appropriate discernment worksheets from earlier sections.

35. First Debrief Question

Begin with:

What did you notice?

Not:

Did you like the candidate?

Go around the table.

Observations:

Patterns:

Surprises:

Questions:

36. What Changed Because We Were Together In Person?

Something we understood more clearly:

Something that confirmed earlier impressions:

Something that complicated an earlier impression:

Something new:

Something we still do not know:

This is one of the central purposes of the weekend.

37. What Might the Candidate Have Learned About Us?

Turn the perspective around.

They probably experienced us as:

They saw our strengths in:

They may have noticed tension around:

Something we said about ourselves that they saw confirmed:

Something they may have experienced differently from how we describe ourselves:

This is mutual discernment. You were being encountered too.

38. Did We Allow Enough Space?

The weekend felt:

☐ Too full
☐ About right
☐ Too unstructured

Candidate had adequate private time:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Candidate had adequate time for questions:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Informal conversation happened naturally:

☐ Yes
☐ No

We learned something because of those informal moments:

What would we change next time?

39. Practical Weekend Checklist

Before the candidate arrives:

☐ Travel confirmed
☐ Lodging confirmed
☐ Expenses explained
☐ Candidate has schedule
☐ Candidate has contact numbers
☐ Committee members have schedule
☐ Transportation assigned
☐ Meals arranged
☐ Dietary needs checked
☐ Accessibility needs checked
☐ Confidentiality reviewed
☐ Staff briefed where appropriate
☐ Congregational leaders briefed where appropriate
☐ Community visits confirmed
☐ Worship arrangements confirmed

☐ Technology checked if needed
☐ Candidate questions solicited
☐ Personal time scheduled
☐ Family needs considered
☐ Next-step process established

40. Review the Schedule One More Time

Look at the finished weekend.

Then ask:

Is every scheduled event necessary?

Where does the candidate have space to breathe?

Where can informal conversation happen?

Where can the candidate explore independently?

Where can they ask difficult questions?

Where will we hear what they are noticing?

Does the weekend feel like hospitality?
Or an endurance test?

Remove something if necessary.

41. Sample Weekend Framework

This is a framework, not a required schedule.

Friday

Late Afternoon
Candidate arrives and checks into lodging.

Evening
Informal dinner with a few Search Committee members.

After Dinner
Candidate returns to lodging. No additional programming.

Saturday

Morning
Breakfast and community tour.

Late Morning
Conversation with staff or ministry leaders.

Lunch
Informal meal.

Early Afternoon
Search Committee conversation.

Mid/Late Afternoon
Candidate personal time and independent exploration.

Evening
Dinner or other appropriate gathering.

Sunday

Morning
Worship and other activities appropriate to the stage of the search.

Lunch
Meal and informal conversation.

Early Afternoon
Final Search Committee conversation.

Departure

The schedule should serve the discernment.

The discernment should not serve the schedule.

42. The Candidate's Weekend Too

Before finalizing the plan, send the candidate the proposed schedule and ask:

“Does this weekend give you the opportunities you need for your own discernment?”

Candidate requested:

Changes we made:

Something they want to explore independently:

That question may reveal something the committee never thought to include.

43. A Prayer Before the Weekend

Gracious God,

you have brought our conversations to this moment.

We give thanks for the trust that has begun to grow between us.

**As we welcome this candidate into our community,
free us from the need to impress
and from the desire to test.**

Give us instead the gifts of hospitality, curiosity, honesty, and attention.

Help us notice what becomes visible when we are together.

**Give the candidate freedom to see us clearly,
to ask what needs to be asked,
and to listen for their own calling.**

Give us that same freedom.

**Through formal conversations and ordinary moments,
through worship and meals,
through questions and silence,
help us recognize whether you are drawing our journeys together.**

Amen.

Leader's Note

The interview weekend is easy to overproduce.

Committees want candidates to meet everyone, see everything, understand the community, experience the congregation, tour the church, visit mission projects, answer remaining questions, eat with leaders, and perhaps preach—all between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon.

More activity does not produce more discernment.

Some of the most revealing moments may happen while driving through the community.

Or over an unhurried meal.

Or when the candidate notices something no one thought to point out.

Or when a committee member answers a difficult question honestly.

Or when nothing is scheduled and the candidate has time to imagine:

Could I live here?

Could I love these people?

Could we do ministry together?

The committee is asking corresponding questions.

The weekend therefore needs both encounter and space.

Plan carefully.

Practice generous hospitality.

Tell the truth about the congregation and the community.

Then leave enough room for everyone—including the Holy Spirit—to work.

FM 8.2

Sample Weekend Schedules

Purpose

There is no single right schedule for an interview weekend.

The appropriate schedule depends on where committee and candidate are in the discernment process, what remains to be learned, confidentiality, family participation, and denominational or presbytery procedures.

These sample schedules are starting points. Use them with FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner to create a weekend appropriate to your search.

The guiding principle is:

Schedule what serves discernment. Leave space for what you cannot schedule.

1. Before Choosing a Schedule

Identify the kind of visit you are planning.

☐ Confidential interview weekend
☐ Advanced discernment weekend
☐ Candidate and spouse/partner visit
☐ Candidating weekend
☐ Other: _____

What do we most need from this weekend?

What does the candidate most need?

What must remain confidential?

Now choose the sample that most closely fits your situation and adapt it.

2. Sample A — Confidential Interview Weekend

Best Used When

The committee has had several strong conversations with the candidate and wants substantial in-person time before deciding whether to move toward final candidacy.

The candidate's identity remains confidential.

Friday

4:00–6:00 p.m. — Arrival and Hotel Check-In

Candidate is met at the airport or arrives independently.

No committee activity unless necessary.

6:30 p.m. — Informal Dinner

Participants: Two or three committee members.

Purpose: Welcome and ordinary conversation.

Avoid beginning the formal interview over dinner.

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Give the candidate the rest of the evening alone.

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

Participants: Candidate and two committee members.

Purpose: Orientation to the day.

9:30–11:30 a.m. — Community Tour

Possible stops:

neighborhoods

schools

downtown

major employers

community ministries

recreation

areas of growth

areas experiencing challenge

Tell stories about the community rather than simply pointing out buildings.

11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. — Church Building and Ministry Tour

Keep confidentiality in mind if people are present.

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

Informal.

2:00–4:00 p.m. — Search Committee Conversation

Possible topics:

questions arising from previous interviews

leadership

theology

mission

congregational culture

candidate questions

This should be the primary formal conversation of the weekend.

4:00–6:00 p.m. — Candidate Personal Time

Nothing scheduled.

6:30 p.m. — Dinner With Search Committee

Allow ordinary conversation.

8:30 p.m. — Evening Ends

Sunday

9:00 a.m. — Candidate Attends Worship Anonymously

Use only if confidentiality can realistically be protected.

10:30 a.m. — Personal Time

Candidate reflects independently.

11:30 a.m. — Lunch

Small group.

1:00–2:00 p.m. — Closing Conversation

Begin by asking:

What have you noticed?

What surprised you?

What questions do you have now that you have been here?

Discuss next steps and timeline.

2:00 p.m. — Departure

3. Sample B — Advanced Discernment Weekend

Best Used When

Candidate and committee already know one another well and are asking a more focused question:

Can we imagine sharing ministry together?

This weekend should feel less like another round of interviews and more like experiencing possible partnership.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival and Check-In

6:00 p.m. — Dinner With Search Committee

Conversation around:

What has become clearer since we last talked?

What are each of us still discerning?

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–11:00 a.m. — Community Exploration

Focus on the places and issues most relevant to the congregation's ministry.

11:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m. — Conversation With Staff

If appropriate.

Let the candidate ask about:

staff culture

communication

decision making

ministry rhythms

congregational expectations

12:15 p.m. — Lunch

No agenda.

1:30–3:30 p.m. — Search Committee Conversation

Possible questions:

What kind of ministry do you imagine doing here?

What about this congregation gives you energy?

What gives you hesitation?

What would you need from us in order to lead well?

What do you think we would need from you?

Leave at least half the conversation for questions flowing in both directions.

3:30–6:00 p.m. — Personal Time

6:00 p.m. — Dinner With Selected Congregational Leaders

Choose people who can speak honestly about congregational life.

Do not turn the dinner into another interview panel.

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Sunday

Morning — Worship

Appropriate participation depends upon confidentiality and the stage of the search.

After Worship — Candidate Personal Reflection

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

1:30–2:30 p.m. — Final Conversation

Ask:

After being here, what feels different from what you imagined?

What feels more possible?

What feels less certain?

What do you still need from us?

Clarify next steps.

Departure

4. Sample C — Candidate and Spouse or Partner Weekend

Best Used When

The search has reached a point where the candidate needs to consider the practical reality of relocation and life in the community.

The spouse or partner is not being interviewed. That distinction should shape the entire weekend.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival and Private Check-In

6:30 p.m. — Welcome Dinner

Participants: Candidate, spouse/partner, and a few committee members with spouses/partners if appropriate.

Purpose: Hospitality.

No formal interview.

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–11:30 a.m. — Community Tour

Include matters relevant to the whole household:

neighborhoods

housing

schools if relevant

shopping

health care

recreation

cultural life

transportation

community resources

11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. — Independent Exploration

Let candidate and spouse/partner explore privately.

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

Together or independently.

Ask them what they prefer.

2:00–4:00 p.m. — Separate Activities

Candidate:

Search Committee conversation.

Spouse/partner:

Free time or an optional conversation with a knowledgeable community member if requested.

Do not create a parallel interview for the spouse or partner.

4:00–6:30 p.m. — Private Time

6:30 p.m. — Dinner

Informal.

Evening Free

Sunday

Morning — Worship

As appropriate.

Late Morning — Private Time

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

1:30 p.m. — Candidate Closing Conversation

The spouse or partner participates only if candidate and partner want that.

Ask:

What questions has being here raised for you?

What would you need to explore further?

Departure

5. Sample D — Community-Focused Weekend

Best Used When

Place and community engagement are central to the congregation's ministry and the committee wants the candidate to encounter the community rather than simply hear the congregation describe it.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival

6:30 p.m. — Dinner With Search Committee

Opening question:

What would you most like to understand about this community while you are here?

Saturday

8:00 a.m. — Breakfast

9:00 a.m.–Noon — Community Immersion

Instead of a long driving tour, choose two or three places.

Possible encounters:

community ministry

school

neighborhood organization

local nonprofit

community development project

business district

university or college

social service organization

At each place, let community members tell their own story.

Noon — Lunch With Community Partner

Ask:

What do you wish churches understood about this community?

1:30–3:00 p.m. — Candidate Personal Exploration

Candidate goes somewhere alone.

3:30–5:00 p.m. — Committee Reflection

Ask:

What did you notice today?

Where did you see possibility?

What questions did the community raise for you?

Where could you imagine this congregation becoming a deeper partner?

Evening — Dinner and Informal Conversation

Sunday

Morning — Worship

Late Morning — Conversation With Mission Leaders

Lunch

Early Afternoon — Closing Conversation

Focus less on:

What would you do?

and more on:

What are you beginning to imagine?

6. Sample E — Staff and Leadership-Focused Weekend

Best Used When

The pastor will supervise staff, work closely with a session or governing board, or enter a complex organizational system.

The weekend allows candidate and leaders to experience one another in relationship.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival

6:30 p.m. — Search Committee Dinner

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–11:00 a.m. — Staff Conversation

Topics may include:

staff roles

communication

decision making

collaboration

supervision

workload

ministry culture

11:15 a.m.–12:15 p.m. — Building and Ministry Tour

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

2:00–3:30 p.m. — Conversation With Session or Governing Leaders

Let the candidate ask:

How do pastor and session work together here?

How are difficult decisions made?

What do you expect from your pastor as a leader?

What should the pastor expect from you?

3:30–6:00 p.m. — Candidate Personal Time

6:30 p.m. — Informal Dinner

Do not invite every leader the candidate has already spent the day meeting.

Sunday

Morning — Worship

Lunch

Early Afternoon — Search Committee Conversation

Ask:

What did you learn about how leadership functions here?

Where do you imagine your leadership style fitting naturally?

Where might adjustment be required—from you or from us?

7. Sample F — Candidating Weekend

Best Used When

The Search Committee has completed its primary discernment, the candidate is prepared to move toward a call, and the congregation is entering the formal candidating process.

Follow presbytery and denominational requirements.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival

Evening — Welcome Dinner

Depending upon confidentiality and polity requirements, participants might include:

Search Committee

session

staff

other designated leaders

The purpose is welcome, not evaluation.

Saturday

Morning — Congregational or Leadership Gathering

Possible elements:

candidate introduction

candidate's ministry story

congregational story

questions and conversation

Lunch

Afternoon — Candidate/Family Personal Time

Protect this.

Late Afternoon — Optional Community Exploration

Evening — Informal Congregational Gathering

Only if useful and appropriate.

Do not schedule events simply because the candidate is available.

Sunday

Before Worship — Preparation Time

Candidate should not be expected to socialize immediately before preaching.

Worship — Candidate Preaches and Leads as Appropriate

After Worship — Congregational Interaction

Follow established procedures.

Congregational Meeting — If Required

Follow polity and presbytery procedures precisely.

Lunch

Keep it celebratory but recognize that formal processes may still remain.

Departure or Additional Private Time

8. Sample G — Shorter Two-Day Visit

Best Used When

Travel or scheduling makes a full weekend impractical, or when the committee has already completed extensive discernment remotely.

Day One

10:00 a.m. — Arrival

10:30 a.m.–Noon — Community Tour

Noon — Lunch

1:30–3:30 p.m. — Search Committee Conversation

3:30–5:30 p.m. — Personal Time

6:00 p.m. — Dinner

Evening Free

Day Two

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–10:30 a.m. — Staff or Leadership Conversation

10:45–11:45 a.m. — Church and Ministry Tour

Noon — Lunch

1:00–2:00 p.m. — Closing Conversation

2:30 p.m. — Departure

Do not compensate for a shorter visit by eliminating breaks.

9. Sample H — When the Candidate Has Already Visited the Community

Sometimes a candidate already knows the area or has privately explored it.

Do not automatically repeat the standard tour.

Use the time differently.

Friday

Arrival and informal dinner.

Saturday Morning

Ask the candidate:

What have you already noticed about this community?

Then visit only places connected with questions they want to explore.

Saturday Afternoon

Longer mutual-discernment conversation.

Saturday Evening

Free evening or informal dinner.

Sunday

Worship and closing conversation.

Use the time saved to deepen conversation rather than add activities.

10. What Not to Schedule

Avoid creating a weekend that looks like this:

Friday

5:00 Arrival
5:30 Church tour
6:00 Staff dinner
7:30 Search Committee interview
9:30 Dessert with session

Saturday

7:30 Breakfast
8:30 Community tour
10:30 Mission visit
11:30 Staff meeting
12:30 Lunch with elders
2:00 Search Committee interview
4:00 Housing tour
5:30 Reception
7:00 Dinner with leaders
9:00 “Informal” conversation

Sunday

7:30 Breakfast
8:30 Sunday school

9:30 Worship
11:00 Reception
12:00 Lunch
1:00 Final interview
2:00 Airport

You may learn that the candidate can survive exhaustion. You will probably learn less about whether you are called to ministry together.

11. A Better Rhythm

Think in terms of rhythm:

Encounter → Space → Conversation → Space → Encounter

rather than:

Event → Event → Event → Event → Event

Where is encounter in our schedule?

Where is reflection?

Where is ordinary conversation?

Where is private time?

Where is deeper discernment?

A weekend needs all five.

12. How Many Formal Conversations?

Usually, fewer than you think.

For most interview weekends:

One substantial committee conversation

plus

One shorter closing conversation

may be enough.

The rest of the weekend allows candidate and congregation to gather experiences that make those conversations meaningful.

13. How Many People Should the Candidate Meet?

Ask:

Does this person provide a perspective the candidate actually needs?

If the answer is no, do not add another meeting.

Essential:

Helpful:

Can wait:

A candidate does not need to meet the entire organizational chart.

14. Meals

Meals invite ordinary conversation. They become exhausting when every meal brings a different group asking questions.

Try:

One meal with a clear purpose.

One meal with informal conversation.

One meal alone or with the candidate's family.

For a full weekend, that rhythm may be far more hospitable than filling every table.

15. Personal Time

For a full weekend, try to provide at least one substantial block of uninterrupted personal time.

Not:

3:45–4:15 Free Time

Prefer:

3:30–6:00 Candidate Personal Time

The candidate may need to call someone important to their discernment. That conversation may matter more than anything else you could schedule.

16. What About Housing?

If relocation is becoming a serious possibility, housing deserves attention.

Options include:

☐ General neighborhood tour
☐ Meeting with a realtor
☐ Independent housing exploration
☐ Providing housing information before the visit
☐ Online listings
☐ Other: _____

Avoid spending half the weekend touring houses unless the candidate specifically wants that.

The committee is not the candidate's real estate agent.

17. What About Schools?

If relevant, ask the candidate what information would be useful.

Do not assume.

Possible resources:

☐ School district information
☐ Private school information
☐ Preschool/childcare information
☐ School visit
☐ Conversation with a parent
☐ Independent exploration

Let the candidate determine what their family needs.

18. What About a Spouse or Partner?

The spouse or partner may want:

community information

employment information

housing information

time alone

time with the candidate

no organized activities at all

Ask. Do not assume hospitality means assigning them a host for the entire weekend.

19. What About Children?

If children accompany the candidate:

Ask the family what would help.

Possible needs include:

☐ Childcare
☐ Family-friendly meals
☐ Recreation
☐ Hotel pool time
☐ Age-appropriate community activities
☐ Private family time

Do not make children perform friendliness for the Search Committee.

They are children, not candidate references.

20. What About Worship?

Worship should serve discernment rather than become a performance test.

If the candidate is simply attending:

Give them room to experience worship.

If the candidate is preaching:

Give them room to prepare.

If the candidate is leading:

Provide all necessary information beforehand.

Whatever the situation:

Do not schedule the candidate into exhaustion Saturday night and expect their best self Sunday morning.

21. What About Confidentiality?

A confidential visit requires a different schedule from a candidating weekend.

Consider:

Can the candidate attend worship anonymously?

Can they tour the church without being recognized as a candidate?

Who must know their identity?

What will those people be told about confidentiality?

Could social media expose the visit?

Are photographs appropriate?

Usually, no photographs of a confidential candidate should be posted or circulated.

22. What About Social Media?

Before the weekend:

☐ Remind participants about confidentiality.
☐ Do not post candidate photographs.
☐ Do not tag the candidate.
☐ Do not announce gatherings involving a confidential candidate.
☐ Do not create online speculation.

A candidate's current ministry may be affected by a careless photograph.

Treat confidentiality seriously.

23. What About Alcohol?

Do not assume either preference.

If alcohol is ordinarily available at a meal, make nonalcoholic choices equally natural and visible.

Do not make the candidate explain whether or why they drink or do not drink.

Hospitality should not put someone in an awkward position.

24. What About Dietary Needs?

Ask before the weekend:

“Do you or anyone traveling with you have dietary needs or preferences we should know about as we plan meals?”

Then accommodate them without making them a topic of conversation.

25. What About Accessibility?

Ask:

“Is there anything about travel, lodging, transportation, mobility, hearing, vision, or accessibility that would help us make the visit work well for you?”

Do not make people disclose more than they need to.

Use the information to practice hospitality.

26. What About Expenses?

The candidate should know before traveling:

what is covered

how travel is booked

what receipts are needed

how mileage is calculated

when reimbursement will occur

Explain reimbursement before the visit, not Sunday afternoon.

27. What About Downtime After Preaching?

If the candidate preaches Sunday morning, do not schedule an immediate evaluation.

Consider:

Worship

then

30–60 minutes of unstructured time

then

Lunch

then

Closing conversation

Give the candidate time to come down from the pulpit before another major conversation.

28. Sample Closing Conversation

Regardless of which schedule you use, reserve time for this.

Ask the candidate:

What did you notice?

What surprised you?

What gave you energy?

What gave you pause?

What questions emerged that you did not have before you came?

What would you still need to understand if our discernment continues?

Then ask:

Is there anything you wanted to experience this weekend that we did not make possible?

Listen carefully.

29. End With a Timeline

Before departure, both parties should know:

Committee meets:

Candidate reflects:

Next contact occurs:

Person responsible:

Date:

Do not end with:

“We'll let you know.”

30. Comparing Sample Schedules

Weekend Type	Primary Purpose	Formal Interviewing	Community Exposure	Personal Time
Confidential	Deepen discernment	Moderate	Moderate	High
Advanced Discernment	Imagine partnership	Low–Moderate	Moderate	High
Spouse/Partner	Explore life together	Moderate	High	Very High
Community-Focused	Encounter place	Low	Very High	High

Leadership-Focused	Experience leadership system	Moderate	Moderate	High
Candidating	Congregational discernment	Low	Variable	Essential
Short Visit	Focused discernment	Moderate	Moderate	Protected

The table is not a formula. It helps identify what should receive the most time.

31. Create Your Schedule

Friday

Arrival: _____

Dinner: _____

Evening: _____

Saturday Morning

Saturday Lunch

Saturday Afternoon

Personal Time

From _____ to _____

Saturday Evening

Sunday Morning

Sunday Lunch

Closing Conversation

Departure

32. Now Remove Something

Look at the schedule you just created.

Ask:

If we removed one event, which one would we remove?

Why?

Now ask:

Would the weekend actually be better without it?

If yes, remove it.

Leader's Note

A sample schedule can easily become a template, and a template a checklist.

That is not the purpose of this resource.

The purpose is to help you create the conditions in which mutual discernment can deepen.

By the time a candidate comes for a weekend, you should already know a great deal about one another.

You do not need forty-eight more hours of interviews.

You need to discover what happens when stories become places and faces.

The candidate needs to see the community you have described.

They need to experience the congregation rather than simply hear your description of it.

They need to meet some of the people with whom ministry might be shared.

They need time to imagine ordinary life here.

And they need enough quiet to notice what is happening within them.

The committee needs the same thing.

Resist the temptation to fill the calendar.

Plan the conversations that matter.

Create encounters that reveal something real.

Protect time that belongs to the candidate rather than the committee.

And remember:

A good interview weekend does not answer every question. It helps candidate and congregation recognize which questions now matter most.

FM 8.3

Hospitality Checklist

Purpose

Hospitality during an interview weekend is more than arranging meals, transportation, and a comfortable hotel. It communicates something about the congregation.

Does the candidate feel welcomed or managed?

Is there room to ask for what they need?

Can they be tired without disappointing anyone?

Can a spouse or partner participate without feeling evaluated?

Can the candidate spend time alone without wondering whether the committee expects them somewhere?

Can they encounter the congregation as it actually is rather than as the committee hopes to present it?

Good hospitality removes unnecessary anxiety so candidate and committee can attend to discernment.

The goal is not to impress the candidate, but to make enough room for everyone to be present honestly.

Use this checklist with **FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner** and **FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules**.

---

1. Before Making Arrangements

Ask the candidate rather than making assumptions.

☐ Preferred travel arrangements discussed

☐ Arrival and departure needs confirmed

☐ Dietary needs or preferences requested

☐ Accessibility needs requested

☐ Lodging preferences discussed if necessary

☐ Transportation needs discussed

☐ Candidate asked what they hope to experience during the visit

☐ Candidate asked whether they need time to explore housing

☐ Candidate asked whether they want information about schools or childcare

☐ Candidate asked whether a spouse, partner, or family member will accompany them

☐ Candidate asked whether there are other practical matters important to their discernment

Candidate has requested:

_____

_____

Person responsible for follow-up:

_____

_____

2. Travel

☐ Travel dates confirmed

☐ Airline/train reservations confirmed if applicable

☐ Candidate has confirmation information

☐ Mileage reimbursement explained if driving

☐ Rental car arranged if appropriate

☐ Airport/train pickup arranged if needed

☐ Candidate knows who will meet them

☐ Candidate has that person's mobile number

☐ Return transportation arranged

☐ Parking information provided

☐ Tolls or other travel expenses addressed

Arrival:

Person responsible:

Departure:

Person responsible:

3. Expenses

Candidates should not have to wonder what they are expected to pay for.

☐ Travel expenses explained

☐ Lodging expenses explained

☐ Meals explained

☐ Mileage rate provided if applicable

☐ Rental vehicle expenses explained

☐ Parking and tolls addressed

☐ Family travel expenses addressed if applicable

☐ Reimbursement process explained

☐ Candidate knows what receipts are required

☐ Candidate knows where to send expenses

☐ Candidate knows approximately when reimbursement will occur

Person responsible for expenses:

Reimbursement contact:

4. Lodging

Whenever possible, provide private lodging.

☐ Hotel or other lodging reserved

☐ Candidate has confirmation number

☐ Candidate has address

☐ Candidate has check-in information

☐ Candidate has check-out information

☐ Parking is available

☐ Accessibility needs addressed

☐ Internet access available

☐ Candidate can get to and from lodging independently if desired

☐ Candidate knows whom to contact if there is a problem

Lodging:

Address:

Confirmation:

Contact:

A committee member's home may seem warmer and more economical, but it can leave the candidate feeling observed from breakfast until bedtime. Privacy is hospitality too.

---

5. The Candidate's Room

If practical, consider having a simple welcome waiting.

☐ Welcome note

☐ Weekend schedule

☐ Committee contact information

☐ Church address

☐ Community map or information

☐ Water

☐ Simple snack

☐ Other: _____

Avoid elaborate gifts. The message should be, “We're glad you're here,” not, “We really hope you choose us.”

---

6. The Schedule

☐ Candidate received the schedule in advance

☐ Candidate had an opportunity to suggest changes

☐ Locations are clearly identified

☐ Transportation is clear

☐ Participants are identified where helpful

☐ Purpose of formal conversations is clear

☐ Beginning and ending times are included

☐ Personal time is explicitly scheduled

☐ Meals are identified

☐ Worship expectations are clear

☐ Departure arrangements are clear

☐ Next-step conversation is included

Ask:

Does the schedule look manageable?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is there anything we can remove?

---

7. Protect Personal Time

☐ At least one substantial block of private time is scheduled

☐ Committee members know not to fill that time

☐ Candidate can explore independently

☐ Candidate can return to lodging if desired

☐ Candidate has transportation independence where possible

☐ Family members have private time together

☐ No one expects an explanation of how the candidate used the time

Write it on the schedule:

Candidate Personal Time

Do not write “Free time if available.” Make it available.

8. Meals

☐ Dietary needs confirmed

☐ Allergies addressed

☐ Restaurants checked in advance

☐ Reservations made where needed

☐ Candidate knows who is attending

☐ Not every meal has a formal agenda

☐ At least one meal allows ordinary conversation

☐ Meals occur at reasonable times

☐ Candidate is not expected to pay

☐ Alcohol and nonalcoholic choices handled comfortably

☐ Candidate/family has an opportunity to eat alone if desired

Friday dinner:

Saturday breakfast:

Saturday lunch:

Saturday dinner:

Sunday meals:

A meal can be hospitality. Six meals with six different groups asking questions can become six more interviews.

---

9. Who Pays at Restaurants?

Decide before the meal.

☐ Committee member designated to pay

☐ Restaurant knows arrangements if necessary

☐ Candidate is not handed the check

☐ Reimbursement procedures for committee member are clear

Do not create the awkward moment when everyone looks at the bill.

---

10. Transportation During the Weekend

☐ Candidate has access to transportation

☐ Drivers are assigned where needed

☐ Candidate knows who is driving

☐ Drivers know the schedule

☐ Vehicles are clean and comfortable

☐ Candidate is not dependent upon one committee member for the entire weekend

☐ Candidate has addresses in case plans change

☐ Adequate travel time is built into the schedule

Do not turn every car ride into an interview. Silence is allowed.

---

11. Welcome

Who will be the first face the candidate sees?

Person:

Choose someone who can be warm without immediately beginning the search conversation.

A simple:

“We're glad you're here. How was the trip?”

is enough.

The candidate has arrived. Let them arrive.

---

12. Introductions

When introducing people, give the candidate a little context.

Instead of:

“This is Susan.”

try:

“This is Susan. She serves on session and has been involved with our community food ministry for several years.”

☐ Committee members introduced

☐ Staff introduced

☐ Congregational leaders introduced

☐ Community partners introduced

☐ Candidate is not expected to remember everyone

☐ Name tags considered for larger gatherings

Do not quiz the candidate later on names.

---

13. The Church Building

Before the candidate arrives:

☐ Building is unlocked when needed

☐ Rooms are ready

☐ Restrooms are clean

☐ Temperature is comfortable

☐ Meeting room is arranged conversationally

☐ Water is available

☐ Technology is functioning

☐ Wi-Fi information is available

☐ Accessibility is checked

☐ Parking is clear

☐ Candidate knows where entrances are

☐ Candidate has access to a private space if needed

You do not need a perfect building, only a functioning one.

---

14. Meeting Spaces

Avoid creating an interrogation room.

☐ Chairs allow conversation

☐ Candidate is not seated alone facing the committee

☐ Everyone can see one another

☐ Water is available

☐ Interruptions are minimized

☐ Phones are silenced

☐ Adequate time is reserved

☐ End time is honored

The physical arrangement communicates something about mutuality.

---

15. Community Tour

☐ Tour has a clear purpose

☐ Candidate's interests have shaped the tour

☐ Driver knows the route

☐ Tour includes more than attractive neighborhoods

☐ Community strengths are visible

☐ Community challenges are visible

☐ Congregational mission connections are included

☐ Candidate has opportunities to ask questions

☐ Tour is not rushed

☐ Candidate has time to look rather than only listen

Remember:

You are introducing the candidate to a place they may be called to love.

Do not turn the community into a sales presentation.

---

16. Meeting Staff

☐ Staff know why they are meeting the candidate

☐ Confidentiality expectations are clear

☐ Staff know whether feedback will be requested

☐ Candidate has time to ask staff questions

☐ Staff have time to describe their work

☐ Conversation is not scripted

☐ Staff are not expected to sell the congregation

☐ Candidate is not expected to impress staff

If staff will work closely with the new pastor, honest conversation matters more than polished conversation.

---

17. Meeting Congregational Leaders

☐ Participants chosen intentionally

☐ Candidate knows who they are

☐ Leaders understand the purpose

☐ Confidentiality is reviewed

☐ Leaders are encouraged to speak honestly

☐ Candidate has time to ask questions

☐ Gathering has a clear ending time

Do not choose only people who will say wonderful things.

Trustworthy hospitality includes truth.

---

18. Meeting Community Partners

☐ Partner knows why the candidate is visiting

☐ Confidentiality requirements explained

☐ Candidate has opportunity to hear the partner's perspective

☐ Committee does not answer every question for the partner

☐ Candidate has opportunity to ask about the community

A community partner may tell the candidate something about the congregation that the congregation cannot tell about itself.

Let them.

---

19. If a Spouse or Partner Comes

Remember:

The spouse or partner is not a candidate.

☐ Ask what would be useful to them

☐ Provide community information if desired

☐ Provide employment information if requested

☐ Provide housing information if requested

☐ Provide school information if requested

☐ Give them independent time

☐ Give the couple private time together

☐ Participation in activities is optional where possible

☐ Do not ask evaluative questions

☐ Do not report impressions of the spouse or partner to the committee

☐ Do not ask congregation members to evaluate them

Hospitality toward the candidate's family must not become covert assessment.

---

20. If Children Come

☐ Ask parents what would help

☐ Childcare arranged if requested

☐ Age-appropriate activities available

☐ Family-friendly meals planned

☐ Family has private time

☐ Children are not expected to attend every event

☐ Children are not evaluated

☐ No one asks children how they feel about moving

☐ No one asks children whether they want their parent to become the pastor

Children are not part of the interview.

---

21. Accessibility

Ask before the visit:

“Is there anything about travel, lodging, mobility, hearing, vision, food, or accessibility that would help us make the weekend work well for you?”

Then:

☐ Accessibility needs communicated only to those who need to know

☐ Accessible lodging confirmed

☐ Accessible transportation confirmed

☐ Accessible entrances identified

☐ Restrooms accessible

☐ Meeting spaces accessible

☐ Worship accessibility addressed

☐ Hearing assistance available if needed

☐ Printed materials usable

☐ Schedule allows necessary rest

Good hospitality anticipates barriers rather than waiting for the candidate to struggle with them.

---

22. Confidentiality

Before the weekend:

☐ Committee reviews confidentiality agreement

☐ Staff participants briefed

☐ Congregational leaders briefed

☐ Community partners briefed if necessary

☐ Candidate's name shared only as appropriate

☐ Social media expectations communicated

☐ No photographs posted

☐ Candidate is not tagged online

☐ Worship arrangements protect confidentiality where necessary

☐ Hotel or restaurant reservations do not unnecessarily identify the purpose of the visit

☐ Committee members know what to say if someone asks questions

A careless photograph can reveal a confidential search to the candidate's current congregation.

Hospitality includes protecting the candidate's present ministry.

---

23. Social Media

For confidential visits:

☐ No Facebook posts

☐ No Instagram photographs

☐ No group selfies

☐ No tagging

☐ No church newsletter mention

☐ No casual “Guess who we had dinner with?” posts

☐ Participants reminded before the weekend

Do not rely on common sense. Say it explicitly.

---

24. Worship

If the candidate attends:

☐ Candidate knows service time

☐ Parking explained

☐ Entrance identified

☐ Seating plan considered if confidentiality matters

☐ Candidate knows what to expect

☐ Candidate has worship information if helpful

If the candidate participates:

☐ Responsibilities clearly communicated

☐ Order of worship sent in advance

☐ Scripture communicated

☐ Technology needs addressed

☐ Microphone explained

☐ Robing expectations communicated

☐ Candidate has preparation space

☐ Candidate has time before worship without social obligations

☐ Candidate has time afterward before another major conversation

Do not make Sunday morning harder than necessary.

---

25. If the Candidate Preaches

☐ Preaching expectations communicated well in advance

☐ Scripture selection clear

☐ Sermon length expectations clear

☐ Worship style described

☐ Technology requirements addressed

☐ Candidate has pulpit/space information

☐ Water available

☐ Candidate knows where to be and when

☐ Candidate has private preparation time

☐ No committee member offers last-minute sermon advice

☐ Candidate is not immediately surrounded afterward for evaluation

Let worship be worship.

---

26. Information the Candidate Should Have

Before arriving:

☐ Weekend schedule

☐ Committee names

☐ Mobile contact number

☐ Church address

☐ Lodging information

☐ Travel information

☐ Expense information

☐ Transportation plan

☐ Worship information

☐ Appropriate congregational materials

☐ Community information

☐ Confidentiality expectations

☐ Next-step process

Avoid sending twenty attachments. Give the candidate what they need.

---

27. Information the Candidate May Want

Have available without requiring them to ask repeatedly.

☐ Staff structure

☐ Recent budget

☐ Terms of Call information

☐ Congregational statistics

☐ Ministry information

☐ Mission partnerships

☐ Community demographics

☐ Housing information

☐ School information

☐ Presbytery information

☐ Recent newsletters

☐ Recent worship bulletins

☐ Other: _____

The candidate does not need to receive all of this automatically.

They should be able to obtain it easily.

---

28. Avoid Performing the Congregation

Do not:

☐ Recruit only the happiest members

☐ Hide known challenges

☐ Stage a mission activity for the candidate

☐ Clean up a difficult story until it becomes unrecognizable

☐ Tell staff what they are supposed to say

☐ Avoid people because they might be honest

☐ Pretend disagreements do not exist

☐ Promise changes the congregation has not agreed to make

Hospitality is not presentation. It is welcome into reality.

---

29. Avoid Over-Attending

Hospitality can become surveillance.

Do not:

☐ Assign someone to the candidate every waking hour

☐ Ask where they went during personal time

☐ Insist on transporting them everywhere

☐ Invite yourself along when they want to explore

☐ Fill every silence

☐ Ask after every event, “So what did you think?”

☐ Require constant conversation

Give the candidate room.

---

30. Watch for Fatigue

Someone on the committee should pay attention to the candidate's energy.

Signs may include:

- shorter answers
- less conversation
- difficulty concentrating
- repeated references to being tired
- withdrawal
- rushing meals
- declining optional activities

If the candidate appears exhausted, ask:

“Would it be helpful to change the schedule and give you some additional time?”

Then mean it.

Do not interpret fatigue as lack of interest.

---

31. Be Willing to Change the Schedule

Weather changes.

Flights are delayed.

Conversations run long.

People get tired.

Unexpected questions emerge.

☐ Committee knows what can be dropped

☐ Candidate knows schedule is flexible

☐ One person has authority to make practical adjustments

☐ Nonessential events can be canceled

☐ Rest takes priority over completing the checklist

A well-planned weekend can still change.

---

32. Small Things Matter

Before the candidate arrives, check:

☐ Candidate's name is spelled correctly

☐ Contact numbers work

☐ Reservations are correct

☐ Hotel knows who is paying

☐ Restaurants are open

☐ Church keys are available

☐ Rooms are unlocked

☐ Bathrooms are clean

☐ Coffee is available where promised

☐ Water is available

☐ Technology works

☐ Addresses are correct

☐ Drivers know where they are going

None of these is profound, but when they go wrong they consume attention that should be available for discernment.

---

33. Hospitality During Difficult Questions

Hospitality does not mean avoiding hard conversations. It creates conditions in which they can happen respectfully.

☐ Listen without becoming defensive

☐ Answer honestly

☐ Allow committee members to acknowledge differences

☐ Do not correct one another performatively in front of the candidate

☐ Say “We don't know” when appropriate

☐ Say “We disagree about that” when true

☐ Give the candidate room to ask follow-up questions

☐ Do not punish candor with coldness afterward

The candidate should not have to choose between asking an important question and remaining a welcome guest.

34. Hospitality Toward Committee Members

The committee is participating in an intense weekend too.

☐ Responsibilities distributed

☐ No one person drives every trip

☐ Meal responsibilities shared

☐ Committee members know when they are expected

☐ Committee members do not need to attend every event

☐ Time allowed for committee members to rest

☐ Debrief scheduled rather than improvised late at night

A tired committee does not discern well either.

35. Ending the Weekend

Before departure:

☐ Candidate has opportunity to ask remaining questions

☐ Committee has asked what candidate noticed

☐ Unanswered questions identified

☐ Follow-up responsibilities assigned

☐ Expense process reviewed if necessary

☐ Travel arrangements confirmed

☐ Candidate knows what happens next

☐ Candidate knows when the committee will contact them

☐ Candidate knows who will initiate contact

End with gratitude, not pressure.

---

36. The Last Conversation

Useful questions include:

What did you notice while you were here?

What surprised you?

What gave you energy?

What gave you pause?

What questions emerged because you were here?

Is there anything you hoped to experience that we did not make possible?

Then listen. Do not explain away their answers.

---

37. The Last Five Minutes

Do not use the last five minutes to ask:

“So, what are you thinking?”

or:

“Do you think you could see yourself here?”

Instead say:

“Thank you for giving us this weekend. We hope you will take some time to reflect on everything you have experienced. We will do the same.”

Then remind them of the next step.

---

38. After the Candidate Leaves

Within twenty-four hours:

☐ Send a brief thank-you

☐ Confirm reimbursement process if needed

☐ Send any promised information

☐ Answer outstanding practical questions where possible

☐ Confirm next communication date

Do not begin lobbying the candidate after the visit. Give them room to discern.

---

39. Hospitality Debrief

When the committee meets, ask:

Where did the weekend feel natural?

Where did it feel over-planned?

Did the candidate have enough personal space?

Did we tell the truth about ourselves?

Did we allow the candidate to ask difficult questions?

Did we listen?

Did anything feel more like selling than welcoming?

What would we do differently next time?

---

40. Final Hospitality Checklist

Before the candidate arrives, confirm:

☐ Travel

☐ Lodging

☐ Transportation

☐ Expenses

☐ Dietary needs

☐ Accessibility

☐ Schedule

☐ Personal time

☐ Meals

☐ Family needs

☐ Meeting spaces

☐ Community tour

☐ Staff conversations

☐ Congregational leader conversations

☐ Confidentiality

☐ Social media

☐ Worship arrangements

☐ Candidate questions

☐ Contact information

☐ Next-step process

And then ask one more question:

Have we made room for this person to be our guest rather than our candidate every moment of the weekend?

If not, change something.

Leader's Note

Hospitality is easy to confuse with impressing someone.

The church is spotless.

The best restaurant is reserved.

The most enthusiastic members are ready.

The candidate is driven past the prettiest neighborhoods.

Everyone is on their best behavior.

That may create a pleasant weekend without creating an honest one.

Christian hospitality makes room for another person to enter our life as it actually is.

That means offering comfort without performance.

Attention without surveillance.

Generosity without obligation.

Truth without defensiveness.

Space without abandonment.

The candidate should leave knowing more than whether your committee was friendly.

They should know something about what it might feel like to live among these people and share ministry with them.

And you should know something about what it was like to welcome this particular person into your life together.

That is why the smallest acts of hospitality matter.

A clear schedule.

A room of their own.

A meal without an agenda.

An honest answer.

Two hours when no one needs anything from them.

A ride to the airport during which nobody conducts one last interview.

None of these will determine a call. Together, however, they create space in which candidate and congregation can attend to the question that matters:

Can we imagine receiving one another—not simply as candidate and committee, but as partners in ministry?

FM 8.4

Community Tour Planner

Purpose

A candidate is not simply considering a position in a congregation. They are considering a call to ministry in a place.

An interview weekend should therefore help the candidate encounter the community—not simply drive through while committee members point out schools, subdivisions, restaurants, and the hospital.

A good community tour helps a candidate begin asking:

Who lives here?

What gives this community life?

Where are people struggling?

What is changing?

Who is already doing good work here?

Where is this congregation connected to its community—and where is it not?

What might ministry in this place ask of us together?

Use this planner with **FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner**, **FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules**, and **FM 8.3 — Hospitality Checklist**.

The purpose is not to convince the candidate that this is a wonderful place to live, but to help them begin to encounter the place where they may be called to minister.

1. Begin With the Candidate

Before planning the route, ask:

"What would you particularly like to understand about our community while you are here?"

Candidate wants to explore:

Candidate has questions about:

Candidate would like to see:

Candidate would like to meet:

Practical matters important to the candidate:

☐ Housing
☐ Schools
☐ Employment opportunities for spouse/partner
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Transportation
☐ Shopping and services
☐ Cultural life
☐ Colleges or universities
☐ Other: _____

Do not assume that what interests the committee will be what the candidate needs to see.

2. Decide What Kind of Tour You Are Planning

A community tour can serve several purposes.

Which matter most for this visit?

☐ Introduce the candidate to the community
☐ Understand community needs
☐ Encounter community assets
☐ See congregational mission in context
☐ Explore neighborhoods
☐ Understand demographic change
☐ Meet community leaders
☐ Explore practical relocation questions
☐ Help candidate/family imagine daily life
☐ Explore possible future ministry partnerships
☐ Other: _____

Our primary purpose is:

If you try to accomplish everything, you will probably spend four hours in a car. Choose.

3. Who Should Lead the Tour?

Do not automatically choose the Search Committee chair.

Consider someone who:

knows the community well

is curious about the community

understands more than one part of it

can tell stories without talking continuously

can acknowledge challenges honestly

does not need to sell the community

Tour leader:

Why?

Driver, if different:

Other participants:

Keep the group small.

A van full of committee members can turn the tour into another interview.

4. Start With a Map

Before deciding where to drive, look at the community as a whole.

Mark:

☐ Church
☐ Congregational neighborhoods
☐ Downtown or town center
☐ Schools
☐ Hospitals and health services
☐ Major employers
☐ Shopping areas
☐ Parks and recreation
☐ Colleges or universities
☐ Government offices
☐ Community organizations
☐ Congregational mission sites

☐ Social service agencies
☐ New development
☐ Older neighborhoods
☐ Areas experiencing economic stress
☐ Areas of demographic change
☐ Transportation corridors
☐ Other churches and faith communities
☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

What story does this map tell about our community?

5. What Gives This Community Life?

Every community has assets.

Identify places that reveal them.

Places where people gather:

Community institutions people trust:

Important organizations:

Places of beauty:

Cultural resources:

Recreation:

Community traditions:

People or organizations doing creative work:

Choose one or two places that help the candidate experience those strengths.

6. Where Is the Community Hurting?

Do not create a tour that hides difficulty.

Significant community concerns include:

☐ Poverty
☐ Housing affordability
☐ Homelessness
☐ Food insecurity
☐ Loneliness or isolation
☐ Mental health needs
☐ Addiction
☐ Aging population
☐ Youth needs
☐ Educational disparities
☐ Employment changes
☐ Racial or cultural divisions
☐ Population decline
☐ Rapid growth
☐ Transportation
☐ Environmental concerns
☐ Other: _____

Where are these realities visible?

Who understands them better than we do?

Could the candidate hear from that person?

A community's pain should not become sightseeing. If a difficult reality matters, find someone who can help the candidate understand it with dignity and context.

7. What Is Changing?

A pastor is not being called only to the community that exists today.

Changes we are experiencing:

☐ Population growth
☐ Population decline
☐ New housing
☐ Rising housing costs
☐ Changing racial or ethnic demographics
☐ Aging population
☐ Younger families arriving
☐ Economic transition
☐ Major employer changes
☐ Downtown redevelopment
☐ School changes
☐ New community organizations
☐ Changing religious participation
☐ Other: _____

A place where the candidate can see this change:

A story that helps explain it:

What questions does this change raise for our congregation?

8. Where Do Our Members Live?

Mark on the map where members generally live.

Most members live:

The congregation draws from:

☐ Immediate neighborhood
☐ Several neighborhoods
☐ Entire town/city

☐ Several communities
☐ Rural region
☐ Large geographic area
☐ Other: _____

Has this changed over time?

Is the church still located near the people it primarily serves?

What does that mean for ministry?

This can reveal something important about the relationship between congregation and place.

9. The Neighborhood Around the Church

Do not drive away from the church too quickly.

Walk if practical.

Within several blocks of the church, we notice:

Who lives nearby?

What businesses are nearby?

What institutions are nearby?

Where do people gather?

What signs of change do we see?

What signs of need?

What signs of vitality?

How well does the congregation know this neighborhood?
The candidate may notice things committee members have stopped seeing. Let them.

10. Congregation and Neighborhood

Ask:

People living near the church probably think of us as:

We know this because:

Our strongest neighborhood relationships are:

People nearby regularly enter the church for:

People who use our building but may not worship with us:

A relationship we would like to strengthen:
Do not explain away weak connections. They may be important information for the candidate.

11. Downtown or Community Center

If your community has a recognizable center, include it.

What happens here?

Who gathers here?

What has changed?

What is flourishing?

What is struggling?

What story should the candidate know?
Then allow some quiet. The candidate does not need narration every second.

12. Schools

If schools are relevant to understanding the community:

Schools to see:

Why?

What should the candidate understand about local education?

Congregational relationships with schools:

Community concerns related to children or youth:

If the candidate has children, distinguish between:

Understanding schools as part of the community
and

Evaluating schools for their family.
Give them private time for the second.

13. Housing

Help the candidate understand housing without turning the tour into house hunting.

Typical housing options:

Approximate areas candidates often consider:

Housing challenges:

Rental availability:

Home ownership realities:

Commute patterns:

Candidate wants additional housing exploration:
☐ Yes
☐ No
If yes:
☐ Independent exploration
☐ Realtor contact
☐ Online information
☐ Separate housing tour
The candidate may prefer to explore privately.

14. Health Care

Major health resources:

Hospital:

Specialty care:

Mental health resources:

Senior services:

Significant gaps:

This may matter both personally and pastorally.

15. Major Employers and the Local Economy

Major employers:

Important industries:

Economic strengths:

Economic pressures:

Employment patterns are changing because:

What does this mean for families in the congregation?

What does it mean for the wider community?

16. Community Institutions

Identify institutions that shape local life.

☐ Schools
☐ College/university
☐ Hospital

☐ Government
☐ Military installation
☐ Major employers
☐ Libraries
☐ Arts organizations
☐ Recreation organizations
☐ Social service agencies
☐ Civic organizations
☐ Other: _____

Three especially important institutions:

Why do they matter?

17. Other Faith Communities

A candidate should understand something about the religious ecology of the community.

Neighboring congregations:

Other Christian traditions:

Other faith communities:

Ecumenical relationships:

Cooperative ministries:

Relationships we wish were stronger:

Do not describe other congregations primarily as competition. They are neighbors in ministry.

18. Congregational Mission in the Community

Visit one or two places where the congregation's ministry becomes visible beyond its own building.

Ministry:

Location:

What happens there?

Who participates?

Community partners:

What has the congregation learned through this ministry?

What questions remain?

Do not try to visit every mission project. Choose those that reveal something important.

19. Let a Community Partner Speak

Consider including one brief conversation with someone who is not a member of the congregation.

Possible people:

school principal

nonprofit leader

community organizer

business owner

social service provider

neighborhood leader

local government official

college leader

mission partner

Person:

Organization:

Why this person?

Ask them:

What do you value about this community?

What challenges do you see?

What is changing?

What do you wish churches understood about this place?

Where do you see opportunities for partnership?

Then listen.

20. Do Not Script the Community Partner

Tell them why the candidate is visiting, subject to confidentiality.

Do not tell them what to say.

Avoid:

“Be sure to tell them about all the wonderful things our church does.”

Instead:

“We would value your helping our candidate understand this community from your perspective.”

The point is perspective, not endorsement.

21. Places of Gathering

Where do people encounter one another naturally?

☐ Coffee shops
☐ Restaurants
☐ Parks
☐ Libraries
☐ Sports fields
☐ Community centers

☐ Farmers markets
☐ Downtown
☐ Shopping centers
☐ Schools
☐ Senior centers
☐ Other: _____

A place worth stopping:

Why?
Perhaps have coffee there instead of simply driving past.

22. Places of Separation

Where do people in the community rarely encounter one another?

Consider:

geography

race

income

age

politics

housing patterns

schools

transportation

culture

We notice separation around:

How does the congregation experience this?

Does the congregation bridge any of these divisions?

Where might it?

This can become a significant ministry conversation.

23. Places of Possibility

Ask committee members:

Where do you see something emerging that gives you hope?

Place:

What is happening?

Who is involved?

Why does it matter?

Does the congregation have any relationship with it?

Do not limit the tour to problems. Mission begins with noticing gifts as well as needs.

24. Places We Have Overlooked

Ask:

What part of our community would we probably never think to show a candidate?

Why?

Could that omission tell us something?

Perhaps that place belongs on the tour.

25. What Not to Do

Avoid the narrated real-estate tour:

“That's the best subdivision.”

“Those are the good schools.”

“You'll want to stay away from that area.”

“That's where the poor people live.”

“This neighborhood is really coming back.”

Such comments may reveal assumptions more than information.

Speak carefully. Describe. Tell stories. Allow the candidate to notice.

26. Do Not Treat Poverty as Scenery

If the tour includes economically distressed areas, ask why.

What are we helping the candidate understand?

Are we connected with people who live there?

Do we know the community's strengths as well as its needs?

Could someone from the community tell the story better than we can?

Never make someone's difficult circumstances an exhibit on a church tour.

27. Do Not Hide Privilege Either

If significant wealth shapes the community, name it.

Where is wealth visible?

How does it shape community life?

How does it shape the congregation?

What opportunities does it create?

What tensions does it create?

Every place has realities that need honest interpretation.

28. Let the Candidate Notice

At some point, stop talking.

After several minutes, ask:

“What are you noticing?”

Candidate noticed:

Do not immediately explain what they noticed.

Ask:

“What makes that interesting to you?”

Curiosity can reveal how the candidate encounters place.

29. Listen to the Candidate's Questions

During the tour, note what the candidate asks about.

☐ People
☐ Schools
☐ Housing
☐ Poverty
☐ Business
☐ Mission
☐ Community partnerships
☐ Culture
☐ Recreation
☐ Demographics
☐ Other churches
☐ History
☐ Politics
☐ Growth
☐ Other: _____

Questions that stood out:

Do not evaluate the candidate because they failed to ask your favorite question.

Notice patterns.

30. Build the Route

Starting point:

Stop 1:

Why: _____

Stop 2:

Why: _____

Stop 3:

Why: _____

Stop 4:

Why: _____

Optional stop:

Ending point:

Total planned time:

Try to keep the tour focused.

A candidate does not need to see every road in town.

31. Decide Where to Get Out of the Car

A community cannot be experienced entirely through a windshield.

We will stop and walk at:

We will meet someone at:

We will eat or have coffee at:

We will allow independent exploration at:
Even one walk can change the character of the tour.

32. Stories We Want to Tell

Identify a few stories rather than a list of facts.

Story about the community's history:

Story about change:

Story about resilience:

Story about the congregation and community:

Story about something that did not work:
That last story may be as revealing as the successes.

33. Questions We Hope the Tour Raises

Do not try to answer these beforehand.

We hope the candidate begins wondering:

We hope we begin wondering:

A question we might explore later together:
The tour should create conversation, not conclude it.

34. Candidate's Independent Exploration

Consider giving the candidate a map and some time.

You might say:

"You have a couple of hours this afternoon with nothing scheduled. Feel free to explore anything that caught your attention today."

Candidate has transportation:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Candidate has sufficient time:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Places they may want to revisit:

Do not ask for a report afterward. If something mattered, they will probably tell you.

35. If a Spouse or Partner Is Present

Ask what they need from the community tour.

They want to explore:

They would rather explore independently:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Information requested:

☐ Employment
☐ Housing
☐ Schools
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Arts/culture
☐ Other: _____

Do not make the spouse or partner spend three hours hearing the congregation's mission history unless they want to.

36. Confidentiality

If the candidate's presence is confidential:

☐ Community partners briefed
☐ Candidate introduced appropriately
☐ No photographs posted
☐ No social media

☐ Stops chosen with confidentiality in mind
☐ Candidate's current congregation protected

How will we introduce the candidate?
Plan this before entering a public place with them.

37. After the Tour

Do not immediately ask:

“So, do you like our town?”

Instead ask:

What did you notice?

What surprised you?

What gave you energy?

What raised questions?

Where would you like to spend more time?

Who would you like to talk with?

38. Move From Seeing to Ministry

Later—not necessarily in the car—ask:

Where did you notice people creating community?

Where did you notice gifts that a congregation might join rather than create?

Where did you notice pain or disconnection?

What made you curious?

What might you want to understand before imagining ministry?
Notice the order: understand before proposing.

39. What Did We Notice About Ourselves?

After the candidate leaves, the committee should reflect on the tour too.

Places we were eager to show:

Places we avoided:

Stories we told repeatedly:

Things the candidate noticed that we had stopped noticing:

Questions we could not answer:

Something we learned about our own relationship with the community:
The community tour may reveal as much about the congregation as about the community.

40. Community Tour Checklist

Before the tour:

☐ Candidate asked what they want to understand
☐ Purpose established
☐ Route planned
☐ Tour leader selected
☐ Travel time checked
☐ Stops confirmed
☐ Community partners confirmed
☐ Confidentiality reviewed
☐ Accessibility considered
☐ Weather checked
☐ Walking requirements explained
☐ Candidate has appropriate personal time afterward
☐ Practical relocation information available if requested
☐ Committee knows which stories matter
☐ Committee knows when to stop talking

41. Final Planning Question

Look at your route.

Then ask:

If a candidate experienced only this tour, what story would they hear about our community?

Would they encounter:

☐ Its strengths?
☐ Its wounds?
☐ Its diversity?
☐ Its history?
☐ Its changes?
☐ Its people?
☐ Its possibilities?
☐ The congregation's actual relationship with it?

What is missing?

Change the tour accordingly.

Leader's Note

It is surprisingly easy to give a candidate a community tour without helping them encounter the community.

We point out the hospital.

The high school.

The new subdivision.

The shopping center.

The best restaurant.

The park.

The place where the new development is going.

Then we return to the church.

The candidate has learned where things are, but may not have learned much about the place.

A pastor is called into a web of relationships, stories, gifts, wounds, institutions, histories, and hopes.

That place was already alive before the candidate arrived.

God was already there.

People were already loving their neighbors, solving problems, raising children, creating beauty, building businesses, caring for strangers, grieving losses, organizing communities, and imagining better futures.

The congregation is already part of that ecosystem too—although perhaps not always as deeply as it imagines.

So show the candidate the community. More importantly, help them encounter it.

Walk somewhere.

Meet someone.

Listen to a community partner.

Tell a story about something that failed as well as something that succeeded.

Let the candidate notice what you no longer notice.

And do not rush too quickly toward:

"What would you do here?"

A better question comes first:

"What are you beginning to notice?"

That is where ministry in a place begins.

FM 8.1

Interview Weekend Planner

Purpose

An interview weekend is a significant step in mutual discernment.

By this point, committee and candidate have already shared substantial conversations. The weekend allows both to experience what Zoom cannot reveal: the community, congregational life, informal conversation, worship, relationships, and what it might actually feel like to live and minister together.

The temptation is to fill every available hour.

Resist it.

A good interview weekend provides enough structure for meaningful encounters and enough space for the candidate to notice, reflect, ask questions, explore the community, and breathe.

Remember:

The candidate is not coming only to be interviewed. The candidate is coming to discern.

Use this planner to design a weekend that serves both purposes.

1. Begin With the Purpose

Before creating a schedule, ask:

What do we still need to learn about the candidate?

What does the candidate still need to learn about us?

What can happen in person that could not happen through Zoom?

What decisions might follow this weekend?

What should not be decided yet?

Complete:

The primary purpose of this weekend is to…

2. What Kind of Weekend Is This?

Clarify the stage of the process.

☐ Confidential interview weekend
☐ Final candidate visit
☐ Candidating weekend
☐ Weekend including congregational interaction
☐ Weekend including worship leadership
☐ Other: _____

Who knows the candidate is visiting?

Who may meet the candidate?

What confidentiality requirements apply?

Be especially careful when the candidate is currently serving another congregation.

3. Candidate Information

Candidate:

Spouse/partner or family accompanying:

Arrival date:

Arrival time:

Arrival location:

Departure date:

Departure time:

Departure location:

Candidate's preferred contact during the weekend:

Committee contact:

Backup contact:

4. Ask Before You Plan

Do not design the entire weekend and then present it to the candidate. Ask first.

Is there anything you particularly want to experience while you are here?

Are there people you would especially like to meet?

Are there parts of the community you would like to explore?

Are there questions you hope the weekend will help answer?

Would you like time to explore housing?

Schools?

Employment possibilities for a spouse or partner?

Recreation or community life?

Other:

The candidate's agenda belongs in the weekend too.

5. Travel Arrangements

Transportation:

☐ Candidate driving
☐ Air travel
☐ Train
☐ Rental car
☐ Committee transportation
☐ Other: _____

Reservations confirmed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Confirmation information sent to candidate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Who meets the candidate?

Where?

Candidate has contact number?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Return transportation arranged?

☐ Yes
☐ No

6. Expenses

Do not make the candidate wonder which expenses they are expected to absorb.

Congregation will cover:

☐ Airfare
☐ Mileage
☐ Rental car
☐ Lodging
☐ Meals
☐ Parking
☐ Tolls
☐ Family travel
☐ Childcare

☐ Other: _____

How will expenses be handled?

☐ Congregation pays directly
☐ Candidate submits receipts
☐ Mileage reimbursement
☐ Other: _____

Candidate has received instructions?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Person responsible for reimbursement:

Expected reimbursement timeline:

7. Lodging

Lodging:

Address:

Confirmation:

Check-in:

Check-out:

Candidate has details?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Whenever possible, provide private lodging.

Hospitality does not require placing the candidate in a committee member's guest room. Privacy may be the greater hospitality.

8. Transportation During the Weekend

Candidate will:

☐ Have own vehicle
☐ Have rental car

☐ Be transported by committee members
☐ Combination

Who is responsible for transportation?

Does the candidate have:
☐ Church address
☐ Hotel address
☐ Committee contact numbers
☐ Schedule
☐ Directions
☐ Parking instructions

Avoid making the candidate dependent upon committee members for every movement.

Some independence creates useful space.

9. Build the Weekend Around Conversations, Not Events

List the conversations that actually matter.

We need meaningful time with:
☐ Search Committee
☐ Pastor/head of staff
☐ Session
☐ Staff
☐ Ministry leaders
☐ Presbytery representative
☐ Community leaders
☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

Which are essential?

Which would simply be nice?

Which could happen later?

Do not turn the weekend into a receiving line.

10. Friday — Arrival

Arrival:

Who welcomes the candidate?

First activity:

Dinner:

Participants:

Purpose:

Keep the first evening relatively light.
The candidate may have traveled all day.
Do not schedule a three-hour interview over dinner.

11. Friday Evening Conversation

If a conversation is planned:
Time:

Location:

Participants:

Purpose:

Topics:

Candidate questions we want to make room for:

End time:

Honor it.

12. Saturday Morning

Breakfast:

Morning activity:

Participants:

Purpose:

Possible uses include:

☐ Search Committee conversation
☐ Community tour
☐ Staff conversation
☐ Mission-site visits
☐ Neighborhood exploration
☐ Housing exploration
☐ Candidate's personal time
☐ Other: _____

What do we hope this part of the weekend makes possible?

13. The Community Tour

Do not simply drive past buildings.

Help the candidate understand the place.

Consider:

☐ Neighborhoods
☐ Schools
☐ Downtown
☐ Hospitals
☐ Major employers
☐ Universities or colleges
☐ Parks and recreation
☐ Housing
☐ Areas experiencing growth
☐ Areas experiencing economic stress
☐ Community ministries

☐ Partner organizations
☐ Places where members live
☐ Other: _____

Who should lead the tour?

Why this person?

What stories should be told?

What should the candidate have time simply to notice?
A community tour is not a sales tour. Let the candidate see the actual community.

14. Show the Whole Community

Every community has beauty and difficulty.

Places we are proud of:

Places experiencing challenge:

Community changes underway:

Needs the congregation is noticing:

Places where we see possibility:
Do not show only the attractive neighborhoods. A pastor is called to a place, not a brochure.

15. Meeting the Staff

If appropriate at this stage:

Time:

Participants:

Location:

Purpose:

What should staff know about confidentiality?

What does the candidate need to learn?

What do staff need opportunity to ask?

Avoid asking staff to evaluate the candidate unless your process explicitly calls for that.
Let the meeting be relational and informative.

16. Meeting Congregational Leaders

Participants:

Why these people?

What perspective can they provide?

What should the candidate be able to ask them?

Do not assemble only the congregation's biggest enthusiasts.
The candidate needs trustworthy witnesses, not a marketing team.

17. Mission and Community Partners

If mission is central to the congregation's identity, let the candidate encounter it.

Ministry or partner:

Person to meet:

What the candidate might learn:

Why this matters for discernment:
Sometimes fifteen minutes with a community partner reveals more than an hour of committee explanation.

18. Saturday Lunch

Location:

Participants:

Purpose:

Not every meal needs an agenda.

Consider intentionally making one meal simply:

Lunch.
Candidates need ordinary conversation too.

19. Saturday Afternoon — Deeper Conversation

This may be the central committee conversation of the weekend.

Time:

Location:

Participants:

Length:

Areas we still need to explore:

Questions arising from previous interviews:

Questions arising during the visit:

What does the candidate need to explore with us?

Leave substantial time for their questions.

20. Do We Need Another Formal Interview?

Ask before scheduling one.

Is there genuinely new ground to explore?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Or are we repeating earlier interviews because it feels safer than having deeper conversation?

By this stage, the conversation should increasingly sound like:

Could we imagine ministry together?

rather than:

Can you prove again that you are qualified?

21. Saturday Personal Time

Schedule it.

Do not write “Free time if available.” Make it available.

Personal time:

From _____ to _____

The candidate may use this time to:

rest

pray

walk

explore

talk privately with family

visit neighborhoods

make phone calls

write notes

do absolutely nothing

No committee member needs to know which.

22. If a Spouse, Partner, or Family Accompanies the Candidate

They are not additional candidates. Ask what would be helpful to them.

They would like information about:

☐ Housing
☐ Employment
☐ Schools
☐ Childcare
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Community organizations
☐ Other: _____

Who can provide information without evaluating them?

What time will the family have privately?

Never interview the spouse or partner indirectly through hospitality.

23. Saturday Evening

Dinner:

Participants:

Purpose:

Consider whether the evening should be:

☐ Search Committee dinner
☐ Small informal gathering
☐ Dinner with congregational leaders
☐ Dinner with staff
☐ Candidate/family evening alone
☐ Other: _____

End time:

A candidate who has been "on" since breakfast is tired. Hospitality includes knowing when to go home.

24. Sunday Morning

Clarify exactly what Sunday means at this stage.

Candidate will:

☐ Worship anonymously
☐ Observe worship
☐ Meet members informally
☐ Participate in worship
☐ Preach
☐ Lead another part of worship
☐ Attend a class
☐ Other: _____

Confidentiality considerations:

Who needs to know who the candidate is?

Who should not?

Follow all presbytery and denominational procedures regarding candidating and preaching.

25. If the Candidate Worships Anonymously

Plan carefully.

Where will they sit?

Who will accompany them?

How will introductions be handled?

What if someone asks who they are?

How will confidentiality be protected?

Do not make anonymity so elaborate that it draws attention to itself.

26. If the Candidate Preaches

Clarify beforehand:

Scripture:

Who chooses it?

Worship theme:

Service time:

Candidate responsibilities:

Other worship leaders:

Technology information sent?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Order of worship sent?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Deadline for sermon title/materials:

Who communicates worship details?

Do not surprise the candidate with liturgical expectations on Saturday night.

27. Do Not Turn Worship Into an Audition

If the candidate preaches, remember:

One sermon is still only one sermon.

Afterward, avoid immediately asking:

"What did everyone think?"

Instead ask:

What did we hear?

What did we notice?

What questions arose?

How does this connect with what we have already learned?

Evaluate within the whole discernment process.

28. Sunday Lunch

Time:

Location:

Participants:

Purpose:

If this follows worship, allow the candidate time to come down from leading or preaching before beginning another major interview.

29. Final Committee Conversation

Before the candidate leaves, provide an intentional closing conversation.

Time:

Location:

Participants:

Begin with the candidate.

Ask:

What have you noticed this weekend?

What surprised you?

What questions have emerged?

What would you still need to understand as your discernment continues?

Notes:

Then share anything the committee needs the candidate to understand.

30. Do Not Demand a Decision

At the end of an intense weekend, do not ask, “So, are you interested?” Instead say, “We hope you will take some time to reflect on the weekend. We will do the same.”

Both candidate and committee need space after the experience.

31. Clarify What Happens Next

Before the candidate leaves, make sure everyone knows:

Committee will meet:

Candidate will have time to reflect until:

Next communication:

Who will initiate it?

Expected date:
Do not end a significant weekend with “We'll be in touch.”

32. Candidate's Questions Still Unanswered

Before departure, ask:

Is there anything you wanted to learn this weekend that you did not get to explore?

Unanswered questions:

Who will follow up?

By when?

33. Departure

Departure time:

Transportation:

Who assists?

Candidate has:
☐ Travel information
☐ Receipts/instructions
☐ Contact information
☐ Next-step timeline
☐ Any requested materials
Do not conduct one final interview on the way to the airport. Let the journey end graciously.

34. Committee Debrief

Do not begin the formal debrief while half the committee is still driving home.

Schedule it.

Debrief date:

Time:

Location:

Before the meeting, ask members to review their notes.

Use:

FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews

and the appropriate discernment worksheets from earlier sections.

35. First Debrief Question

Begin with:

What did you notice?

Not:

Did you like the candidate?

Go around the table.

Observations:

Patterns:

Surprises:

Questions:

36. What Changed Because We Were Together In Person?

Something we understood more clearly:

Something that confirmed earlier impressions:

Something that complicated an earlier impression:

Something new:

Something we still do not know:

This is one of the central purposes of the weekend.

37. What Might the Candidate Have Learned About Us?

Turn the perspective around.

They probably experienced us as:

They saw our strengths in:

They may have noticed tension around:

Something we said about ourselves that they saw confirmed:

Something they may have experienced differently from how we describe ourselves:

This is mutual discernment. You were being encountered too.

38. Did We Allow Enough Space?

The weekend felt:

☐ Too full
☐ About right
☐ Too unstructured

Candidate had adequate private time:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Candidate had adequate time for questions:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Informal conversation happened naturally:

☐ Yes
☐ No

We learned something because of those informal moments:

What would we change next time?

39. Practical Weekend Checklist

Before the candidate arrives:

☐ Travel confirmed
☐ Lodging confirmed
☐ Expenses explained
☐ Candidate has schedule
☐ Candidate has contact numbers
☐ Committee members have schedule
☐ Transportation assigned
☐ Meals arranged
☐ Dietary needs checked
☐ Accessibility needs checked
☐ Confidentiality reviewed
☐ Staff briefed where appropriate
☐ Congregational leaders briefed where appropriate
☐ Community visits confirmed
☐ Worship arrangements confirmed

☐ Technology checked if needed
☐ Candidate questions solicited
☐ Personal time scheduled
☐ Family needs considered
☐ Next-step process established

40. Review the Schedule One More Time

Look at the finished weekend.

Then ask:

Is every scheduled event necessary?

Where does the candidate have space to breathe?

Where can informal conversation happen?

Where can the candidate explore independently?

Where can they ask difficult questions?

Where will we hear what they are noticing?

Does the weekend feel like hospitality?
Or an endurance test?

Remove something if necessary.

41. Sample Weekend Framework

This is a framework, not a required schedule.

Friday

Late Afternoon
Candidate arrives and checks into lodging.

Evening
Informal dinner with a few Search Committee members.

After Dinner
Candidate returns to lodging. No additional programming.

Saturday

Morning
Breakfast and community tour.

Late Morning
Conversation with staff or ministry leaders.

Lunch
Informal meal.

Early Afternoon
Search Committee conversation.

Mid/Late Afternoon
Candidate personal time and independent exploration.

Evening
Dinner or other appropriate gathering.

Sunday

Morning
Worship and other activities appropriate to the stage of the search.

Lunch
Meal and informal conversation.

Early Afternoon
Final Search Committee conversation.

Departure

The schedule should serve the discernment.

The discernment should not serve the schedule.

42. The Candidate's Weekend Too

Before finalizing the plan, send the candidate the proposed schedule and ask:

“Does this weekend give you the opportunities you need for your own discernment?”

Candidate requested:

Changes we made:

Something they want to explore independently:

That question may reveal something the committee never thought to include.

43. A Prayer Before the Weekend

Gracious God,

you have brought our conversations to this moment.

We give thanks for the trust that has begun to grow between us.

**As we welcome this candidate into our community,
free us from the need to impress
and from the desire to test.**

Give us instead the gifts of hospitality, curiosity, honesty, and attention.

Help us notice what becomes visible when we are together.

**Give the candidate freedom to see us clearly,
to ask what needs to be asked,
and to listen for their own calling.**

Give us that same freedom.

**Through formal conversations and ordinary moments,
through worship and meals,
through questions and silence,
help us recognize whether you are drawing our journeys together.**

Amen.

Leader's Note

The interview weekend is easy to overproduce.

Committees want candidates to meet everyone, see everything, understand the community, experience the congregation, tour the church, visit mission projects, answer remaining questions, eat with leaders, and perhaps preach—all between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon.

More activity does not produce more discernment.

Some of the most revealing moments may happen while driving through the community.

Or over an unhurried meal.

Or when the candidate notices something no one thought to point out.

Or when a committee member answers a difficult question honestly.

Or when nothing is scheduled and the candidate has time to imagine:

Could I live here?

Could I love these people?

Could we do ministry together?

The committee is asking corresponding questions.

The weekend therefore needs both encounter and space.

Plan carefully.

Practice generous hospitality.

Tell the truth about the congregation and the community.

Then leave enough room for everyone—including the Holy Spirit—to work.

FM 8.2

Sample Weekend Schedules

Purpose

There is no single right schedule for an interview weekend.

The appropriate schedule depends on where committee and candidate are in the discernment process, what remains to be learned, confidentiality, family participation, and denominational or presbytery procedures.

These sample schedules are starting points. Use them with FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner to create a weekend appropriate to your search.

The guiding principle is:

Schedule what serves discernment. Leave space for what you cannot schedule.

1. Before Choosing a Schedule

Identify the kind of visit you are planning.

☐ Confidential interview weekend
☐ Advanced discernment weekend
☐ Candidate and spouse/partner visit
☐ Candidating weekend
☐ Other: _____

What do we most need from this weekend?

What does the candidate most need?

What must remain confidential?

Now choose the sample that most closely fits your situation and adapt it.

2. Sample A — Confidential Interview Weekend

Best Used When

The committee has had several strong conversations with the candidate and wants substantial in-person time before deciding whether to move toward final candidacy.

The candidate's identity remains confidential.

Friday

4:00–6:00 p.m. — Arrival and Hotel Check-In

Candidate is met at the airport or arrives independently.

No committee activity unless necessary.

6:30 p.m. — Informal Dinner

Participants: Two or three committee members.

Purpose: Welcome and ordinary conversation.

Avoid beginning the formal interview over dinner.

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Give the candidate the rest of the evening alone.

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

Participants: Candidate and two committee members.

Purpose: Orientation to the day.

9:30–11:30 a.m. — Community Tour

Possible stops:

neighborhoods

schools

downtown

major employers

community ministries

recreation

areas of growth

areas experiencing challenge

Tell stories about the community rather than simply pointing out buildings.

11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. — Church Building and Ministry Tour

Keep confidentiality in mind if people are present.

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

Informal.

2:00–4:00 p.m. — Search Committee Conversation

Possible topics:

questions arising from previous interviews

leadership

theology

mission

congregational culture

candidate questions

This should be the primary formal conversation of the weekend.

4:00–6:00 p.m. — Candidate Personal Time

Nothing scheduled.

6:30 p.m. — Dinner With Search Committee

Allow ordinary conversation.

8:30 p.m. — Evening Ends

Sunday

9:00 a.m. — Candidate Attends Worship Anonymously

Use only if confidentiality can realistically be protected.

10:30 a.m. — Personal Time

Candidate reflects independently.

11:30 a.m. — Lunch

Small group.

1:00–2:00 p.m. — Closing Conversation

Begin by asking:

What have you noticed?

What surprised you?

What questions do you have now that you have been here?

Discuss next steps and timeline.

2:00 p.m. — Departure

3. Sample B — Advanced Discernment Weekend

Best Used When

Candidate and committee already know one another well and are asking a more focused question:

Can we imagine sharing ministry together?

This weekend should feel less like another round of interviews and more like experiencing possible partnership.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival and Check-In

6:00 p.m. — Dinner With Search Committee

Conversation around:

What has become clearer since we last talked?

What are each of us still discerning?

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–11:00 a.m. — Community Exploration

Focus on the places and issues most relevant to the congregation's ministry.

11:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m. — Conversation With Staff

If appropriate.

Let the candidate ask about:

staff culture

communication

decision making

ministry rhythms

congregational expectations

12:15 p.m. — Lunch

No agenda.

1:30–3:30 p.m. — Search Committee Conversation

Possible questions:

What kind of ministry do you imagine doing here?

What about this congregation gives you energy?

What gives you hesitation?

What would you need from us in order to lead well?

What do you think we would need from you?

Leave at least half the conversation for questions flowing in both directions.

3:30–6:00 p.m. — Personal Time

6:00 p.m. — Dinner With Selected Congregational Leaders

Choose people who can speak honestly about congregational life.

Do not turn the dinner into another interview panel.

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Sunday

Morning — Worship

Appropriate participation depends upon confidentiality and the stage of the search.

After Worship — Candidate Personal Reflection

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

1:30–2:30 p.m. — Final Conversation

Ask:

After being here, what feels different from what you imagined?

What feels more possible?

What feels less certain?

What do you still need from us?

Clarify next steps.

Departure

4. Sample C — Candidate and Spouse or Partner Weekend

Best Used When

The search has reached a point where the candidate needs to consider the practical reality of relocation and life in the community.

The spouse or partner is not being interviewed. That distinction should shape the entire weekend.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival and Private Check-In

6:30 p.m. — Welcome Dinner

Participants: Candidate, spouse/partner, and a few committee members with spouses/partners if appropriate.

Purpose: Hospitality.

No formal interview.

8:00 p.m. — Evening Ends

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–11:30 a.m. — Community Tour

Include matters relevant to the whole household:

neighborhoods

housing

schools if relevant

shopping

health care

recreation

cultural life

transportation

community resources

11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. — Independent Exploration

Let candidate and spouse/partner explore privately.

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

Together or independently.

Ask them what they prefer.

2:00–4:00 p.m. — Separate Activities

Candidate:

Search Committee conversation.

Spouse/partner:

Free time or an optional conversation with a knowledgeable community member if requested.

Do not create a parallel interview for the spouse or partner.

4:00–6:30 p.m. — Private Time

6:30 p.m. — Dinner

Informal.

Evening Free

Sunday

Morning — Worship

As appropriate.

Late Morning — Private Time

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

1:30 p.m. — Candidate Closing Conversation

The spouse or partner participates only if candidate and partner want that.

Ask:

What questions has being here raised for you?

What would you need to explore further?

Departure

5. Sample D — Community-Focused Weekend

Best Used When

Place and community engagement are central to the congregation's ministry and the committee wants the candidate to encounter the community rather than simply hear the congregation describe it.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival

6:30 p.m. — Dinner With Search Committee

Opening question:

What would you most like to understand about this community while you are here?

Saturday

8:00 a.m. — Breakfast

9:00 a.m.–Noon — Community Immersion

Instead of a long driving tour, choose two or three places.

Possible encounters:

community ministry

school

neighborhood organization

local nonprofit

community development project

business district

university or college

social service organization

At each place, let community members tell their own story.

Noon — Lunch With Community Partner

Ask:

What do you wish churches understood about this community?

1:30–3:00 p.m. — Candidate Personal Exploration

Candidate goes somewhere alone.

3:30–5:00 p.m. — Committee Reflection

Ask:

What did you notice today?

Where did you see possibility?

What questions did the community raise for you?

Where could you imagine this congregation becoming a deeper partner?

Evening — Dinner and Informal Conversation

Sunday

Morning — Worship

Late Morning — Conversation With Mission Leaders

Lunch

Early Afternoon — Closing Conversation

Focus less on:

What would you do?

and more on:

What are you beginning to imagine?

6. Sample E — Staff and Leadership-Focused Weekend

Best Used When

The pastor will supervise staff, work closely with a session or governing board, or enter a complex organizational system.

The weekend allows candidate and leaders to experience one another in relationship.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival

6:30 p.m. — Search Committee Dinner

Saturday

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–11:00 a.m. — Staff Conversation

Topics may include:

staff roles

communication

decision making

collaboration

supervision

workload

ministry culture

11:15 a.m.–12:15 p.m. — Building and Ministry Tour

12:30 p.m. — Lunch

2:00–3:30 p.m. — Conversation With Session or Governing Leaders

Let the candidate ask:

How do pastor and session work together here?

How are difficult decisions made?

What do you expect from your pastor as a leader?

What should the pastor expect from you?

3:30–6:00 p.m. — Candidate Personal Time

6:30 p.m. — Informal Dinner

Do not invite every leader the candidate has already spent the day meeting.

Sunday

Morning — Worship

Lunch

Early Afternoon — Search Committee Conversation

Ask:

What did you learn about how leadership functions here?

Where do you imagine your leadership style fitting naturally?

Where might adjustment be required—from you or from us?

7. Sample F — Candidating Weekend

Best Used When

The Search Committee has completed its primary discernment, the candidate is prepared to move toward a call, and the congregation is entering the formal candidating process.

Follow presbytery and denominational requirements.

Friday

Afternoon — Arrival

Evening — Welcome Dinner

Depending upon confidentiality and polity requirements, participants might include:

Search Committee

session

staff

other designated leaders

The purpose is welcome, not evaluation.

Saturday

Morning — Congregational or Leadership Gathering

Possible elements:

candidate introduction

candidate's ministry story

congregational story

questions and conversation

Lunch

Afternoon — Candidate/Family Personal Time

Protect this.

Late Afternoon — Optional Community Exploration

Evening — Informal Congregational Gathering

Only if useful and appropriate.

Do not schedule events simply because the candidate is available.

Sunday

Before Worship — Preparation Time

Candidate should not be expected to socialize immediately before preaching.

Worship — Candidate Preaches and Leads as Appropriate

After Worship — Congregational Interaction

Follow established procedures.

Congregational Meeting — If Required

Follow polity and presbytery procedures precisely.

Lunch

Keep it celebratory but recognize that formal processes may still remain.

Departure or Additional Private Time

8. Sample G — Shorter Two-Day Visit

Best Used When

Travel or scheduling makes a full weekend impractical, or when the committee has already completed extensive discernment remotely.

Day One

10:00 a.m. — Arrival

10:30 a.m.–Noon — Community Tour

Noon — Lunch

1:30–3:30 p.m. — Search Committee Conversation

3:30–5:30 p.m. — Personal Time

6:00 p.m. — Dinner

Evening Free

Day Two

8:30 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30–10:30 a.m. — Staff or Leadership Conversation

10:45–11:45 a.m. — Church and Ministry Tour

Noon — Lunch

1:00–2:00 p.m. — Closing Conversation

2:30 p.m. — Departure

Do not compensate for a shorter visit by eliminating breaks.

9. Sample H — When the Candidate Has Already Visited the Community

Sometimes a candidate already knows the area or has privately explored it.

Do not automatically repeat the standard tour.

Use the time differently.

Friday

Arrival and informal dinner.

Saturday Morning

Ask the candidate:

What have you already noticed about this community?

Then visit only places connected with questions they want to explore.

Saturday Afternoon

Longer mutual-discernment conversation.

Saturday Evening

Free evening or informal dinner.

Sunday

Worship and closing conversation.

Use the time saved to deepen conversation rather than add activities.

10. What Not to Schedule

Avoid creating a weekend that looks like this:

Friday

5:00 Arrival
5:30 Church tour
6:00 Staff dinner
7:30 Search Committee interview
9:30 Dessert with session

Saturday

7:30 Breakfast
8:30 Community tour
10:30 Mission visit
11:30 Staff meeting
12:30 Lunch with elders
2:00 Search Committee interview
4:00 Housing tour
5:30 Reception
7:00 Dinner with leaders
9:00 “Informal” conversation

Sunday

7:30 Breakfast
8:30 Sunday school

9:30 Worship
11:00 Reception
12:00 Lunch
1:00 Final interview
2:00 Airport

You may learn that the candidate can survive exhaustion. You will probably learn less about whether you are called to ministry together.

11. A Better Rhythm

Think in terms of rhythm:

Encounter → Space → Conversation → Space → Encounter

rather than:

Event → Event → Event → Event → Event

Where is encounter in our schedule?

Where is reflection?

Where is ordinary conversation?

Where is private time?

Where is deeper discernment?

A weekend needs all five.

12. How Many Formal Conversations?

Usually, fewer than you think.

For most interview weekends:

One substantial committee conversation

plus

One shorter closing conversation

may be enough.

The rest of the weekend allows candidate and congregation to gather experiences that make those conversations meaningful.

13. How Many People Should the Candidate Meet?

Ask:

Does this person provide a perspective the candidate actually needs?

If the answer is no, do not add another meeting.

Essential:

Helpful:

Can wait:

A candidate does not need to meet the entire organizational chart.

14. Meals

Meals invite ordinary conversation. They become exhausting when every meal brings a different group asking questions.

Try:

One meal with a clear purpose.

One meal with informal conversation.

One meal alone or with the candidate's family.

For a full weekend, that rhythm may be far more hospitable than filling every table.

15. Personal Time

For a full weekend, try to provide at least one substantial block of uninterrupted personal time.

Not:

3:45–4:15 Free Time

Prefer:

3:30–6:00 Candidate Personal Time

The candidate may need to call someone important to their discernment. That conversation may matter more than anything else you could schedule.

16. What About Housing?

If relocation is becoming a serious possibility, housing deserves attention.

Options include:

☐ General neighborhood tour
☐ Meeting with a realtor
☐ Independent housing exploration
☐ Providing housing information before the visit
☐ Online listings
☐ Other: _____

Avoid spending half the weekend touring houses unless the candidate specifically wants that.

The committee is not the candidate's real estate agent.

17. What About Schools?

If relevant, ask the candidate what information would be useful.

Do not assume.

Possible resources:

☐ School district information
☐ Private school information
☐ Preschool/childcare information
☐ School visit
☐ Conversation with a parent
☐ Independent exploration

Let the candidate determine what their family needs.

18. What About a Spouse or Partner?

The spouse or partner may want:

community information

employment information

housing information

time alone

time with the candidate

no organized activities at all

Ask. Do not assume hospitality means assigning them a host for the entire weekend.

19. What About Children?

If children accompany the candidate:

Ask the family what would help.

Possible needs include:

☐ Childcare
☐ Family-friendly meals
☐ Recreation
☐ Hotel pool time
☐ Age-appropriate community activities
☐ Private family time

Do not make children perform friendliness for the Search Committee.

They are children, not candidate references.

20. What About Worship?

Worship should serve discernment rather than become a performance test.

If the candidate is simply attending:

Give them room to experience worship.

If the candidate is preaching:

Give them room to prepare.

If the candidate is leading:

Provide all necessary information beforehand.

Whatever the situation:

Do not schedule the candidate into exhaustion Saturday night and expect their best self Sunday morning.

21. What About Confidentiality?

A confidential visit requires a different schedule from a candidating weekend.

Consider:

Can the candidate attend worship anonymously?

Can they tour the church without being recognized as a candidate?

Who must know their identity?

What will those people be told about confidentiality?

Could social media expose the visit?

Are photographs appropriate?

Usually, no photographs of a confidential candidate should be posted or circulated.

22. What About Social Media?

Before the weekend:

☐ Remind participants about confidentiality.
☐ Do not post candidate photographs.
☐ Do not tag the candidate.
☐ Do not announce gatherings involving a confidential candidate.
☐ Do not create online speculation.

A candidate's current ministry may be affected by a careless photograph.

Treat confidentiality seriously.

23. What About Alcohol?

Do not assume either preference.

If alcohol is ordinarily available at a meal, make nonalcoholic choices equally natural and visible.

Do not make the candidate explain whether or why they drink or do not drink.

Hospitality should not put someone in an awkward position.

24. What About Dietary Needs?

Ask before the weekend:

"Do you or anyone traveling with you have dietary needs or preferences we should know about as we plan meals?"

Then accommodate them without making them a topic of conversation.

25. What About Accessibility?

Ask:

“Is there anything about travel, lodging, transportation, mobility, hearing, vision, or accessibility that would help us make the visit work well for you?”

Do not make people disclose more than they need to.

Use the information to practice hospitality.

26. What About Expenses?

The candidate should know before traveling:

what is covered

how travel is booked

what receipts are needed

how mileage is calculated

when reimbursement will occur

Explain reimbursement before the visit, not Sunday afternoon.

27. What About Downtime After Preaching?

If the candidate preaches Sunday morning, do not schedule an immediate evaluation.

Consider:

Worship

then

30–60 minutes of unstructured time

then

Lunch

then

Closing conversation

Give the candidate time to come down from the pulpit before another major conversation.

28. Sample Closing Conversation

Regardless of which schedule you use, reserve time for this.

Ask the candidate:

What did you notice?

What surprised you?

What gave you energy?

What gave you pause?

What questions emerged that you did not have before you came?

What would you still need to understand if our discernment continues?

Then ask:

Is there anything you wanted to experience this weekend that we did not make possible?

Listen carefully.

29. End With a Timeline

Before departure, both parties should know:

Committee meets:

Candidate reflects:

Next contact occurs:

Person responsible:

Date:

Do not end with:

“We'll let you know.”

30. Comparing Sample Schedules

Weekend Type	Primary Purpose	Formal Interviewing	Community Exposure	Personal Time
Confidential	Deepen discernment	Moderate	Moderate	High
Advanced Discernment	Imagine partnership	Low–Moderate	Moderate	High
Spouse/Partner	Explore life together	Moderate	High	Very High
Community-Focused	Encounter place	Low	Very High	High

Leadership-Focused	Experience leadership system	Moderate	Moderate	High
Candidating	Congregational discernment	Low	Variable	Essential
Short Visit	Focused discernment	Moderate	Moderate	Protected

The table is not a formula. It helps identify what should receive the most time.

31. Create Your Schedule

Friday

Arrival: _____

Dinner: _____

Evening: _____

Saturday Morning

Saturday Lunch

Saturday Afternoon

Personal Time

From _____ to _____

Saturday Evening

Sunday Morning

Sunday Lunch

Closing Conversation

Departure

32. Now Remove Something

Look at the schedule you just created.

Ask:

If we removed one event, which one would we remove?

Why?

Now ask:

Would the weekend actually be better without it?

If yes, remove it.

Leader's Note

A sample schedule can easily become a template, and a template a checklist.

That is not the purpose of this resource.

The purpose is to help you create the conditions in which mutual discernment can deepen.

By the time a candidate comes for a weekend, you should already know a great deal about one another.

You do not need forty-eight more hours of interviews.

You need to discover what happens when stories become places and faces.

The candidate needs to see the community you have described.

They need to experience the congregation rather than simply hear your description of it.

They need to meet some of the people with whom ministry might be shared.

They need time to imagine ordinary life here.

And they need enough quiet to notice what is happening within them.

The committee needs the same thing.

Resist the temptation to fill the calendar.

Plan the conversations that matter.

Create encounters that reveal something real.

Protect time that belongs to the candidate rather than the committee.

And remember:

A good interview weekend does not answer every question. It helps candidate and congregation recognize which questions now matter most.

FM 8.4

Community Tour Planner

Purpose

A candidate is not simply considering a position in a congregation. They are considering a call to ministry in a place.

An interview weekend should therefore help the candidate encounter the community—not simply drive through while committee members point out schools, subdivisions, restaurants, and the hospital.

A good community tour helps a candidate begin asking:

Who lives here?

What gives this community life?

Where are people struggling?

What is changing?

Who is already doing good work here?

Where is this congregation connected to its community—and where is it not?

What might ministry in this place ask of us together?

Use this planner with **FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner**, **FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules**, and **FM 8.3 — Hospitality Checklist**.

The purpose is not to convince the candidate that this is a wonderful place to live, but to help them begin to encounter the place where they may be called to minister.

1. Begin With the Candidate

Before planning the route, ask:

“What would you particularly like to understand about our community while you are here?”

Candidate wants to explore:

Candidate has questions about:

Candidate would like to see:

Candidate would like to meet:

Practical matters important to the candidate:

☐ Housing
☐ Schools
☐ Employment opportunities for spouse/partner
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Transportation
☐ Shopping and services
☐ Cultural life
☐ Colleges or universities
☐ Other: _____

Do not assume that what interests the committee will be what the candidate needs to see.

2. Decide What Kind of Tour You Are Planning

A community tour can serve several purposes.

Which matter most for this visit?

☐ Introduce the candidate to the community
☐ Understand community needs
☐ Encounter community assets
☐ See congregational mission in context
☐ Explore neighborhoods
☐ Understand demographic change
☐ Meet community leaders
☐ Explore practical relocation questions
☐ Help candidate/family imagine daily life
☐ Explore possible future ministry partnerships
☐ Other: _____

Our primary purpose is:

If you try to accomplish everything, you will probably spend four hours in a car. Choose.

3. Who Should Lead the Tour?

Do not automatically choose the Search Committee chair.

Consider someone who:

knows the community well

is curious about the community
understands more than one part of it
can tell stories without talking continuously
can acknowledge challenges honestly
does not need to sell the community

Tour leader:

Why?

Driver, if different:

Other participants:

Keep the group small.
A van full of committee members can turn the tour into another interview.

4. Start With a Map

Before deciding where to drive, look at the community as a whole.

Mark:

☐ Church
☐ Congregational neighborhoods
☐ Downtown or town center
☐ Schools
☐ Hospitals and health services
☐ Major employers
☐ Shopping areas
☐ Parks and recreation
☐ Colleges or universities
☐ Government offices
☐ Community organizations
☐ Congregational mission sites
☐ Social service agencies
☐ New development
☐ Older neighborhoods
☐ Areas experiencing economic stress
☐ Areas of demographic change

☐ Transportation corridors
☐ Other churches and faith communities
☐ Other: _____
Now ask:

What story does this map tell about our community?

5. What Gives This Community Life?

Every community has assets.

Identify places that reveal them.

Places where people gather:

Community institutions people trust:

Important organizations:

Places of beauty:

Cultural resources:

Recreation:

Community traditions:

People or organizations doing creative work:

Choose one or two places that help the candidate experience those strengths.

6. Where Is the Community Hurting?

Do not create a tour that hides difficulty.

Significant community concerns include:

☐ Poverty
☐ Housing affordability
☐ Homelessness
☐ Food insecurity
☐ Loneliness or isolation
☐ Mental health needs
☐ Addiction
☐ Aging population
☐ Youth needs
☐ Educational disparities
☐ Employment changes
☐ Racial or cultural divisions
☐ Population decline
☐ Rapid growth
☐ Transportation
☐ Environmental concerns
☐ Other: _____

Where are these realities visible?

Who understands them better than we do?

Could the candidate hear from that person?

A community's pain should not become sightseeing. If a difficult reality matters, find someone who can help the candidate understand it with dignity and context.

7. What Is Changing?

A pastor is not being called only to the community that exists today.

Changes we are experiencing:

☐ Population growth

☐ Population decline
☐ New housing
☐ Rising housing costs
☐ Changing racial or ethnic demographics
☐ Aging population
☐ Younger families arriving
☐ Economic transition
☐ Major employer changes
☐ Downtown redevelopment
☐ School changes
☐ New community organizations
☐ Changing religious participation
☐ Other: _____

A place where the candidate can see this change:

A story that helps explain it:

What questions does this change raise for our congregation?

8. Where Do Our Members Live?

Mark on the map where members generally live.

Most members live:

The congregation draws from:
☐ Immediate neighborhood
☐ Several neighborhoods
☐ Entire town/city
☐ Several communities
☐ Rural region
☐ Large geographic area
☐ Other: _____

Has this changed over time?

Is the church still located near the people it primarily serves?

What does that mean for ministry?

This can reveal something important about the relationship between congregation and place.

9. The Neighborhood Around the Church

Do not drive away from the church too quickly.

Walk if practical.

Within several blocks of the church, we notice:

Who lives nearby?

What businesses are nearby?

What institutions are nearby?

Where do people gather?

What signs of change do we see?

What signs of need?

What signs of vitality?

How well does the congregation know this neighborhood?

The candidate may notice things committee members have stopped seeing. Let them.

10. Congregation and Neighborhood

Ask:

People living near the church probably think of us as:

We know this because:

Our strongest neighborhood relationships are:

People nearby regularly enter the church for:

People who use our building but may not worship with us:

A relationship we would like to strengthen:
Do not explain away weak connections. They may be important information for the candidate.

11. Downtown or Community Center

If your community has a recognizable center, include it.

What happens here?

Who gathers here?

What has changed?

What is flourishing?

What is struggling?

What story should the candidate know?
Then allow some quiet. The candidate does not need narration every second.

12. Schools

If schools are relevant to understanding the community:

Schools to see:

Why?

What should the candidate understand about local education?

Congregational relationships with schools:

Community concerns related to children or youth:

If the candidate has children, distinguish between:

Understanding schools as part of the community

and

Evaluating schools for their family.

Give them private time for the second.

13. Housing

Help the candidate understand housing without turning the tour into house hunting.

Typical housing options:

Approximate areas candidates often consider:

Housing challenges:

Rental availability:

Home ownership realities:

Commute patterns:

Candidate wants additional housing exploration:
☐ Yes
☐ No
If yes:
☐ Independent exploration
☐ Realtor contact
☐ Online information
☐ Separate housing tour
The candidate may prefer to explore privately.

14. Health Care

Major health resources:

Hospital:

Specialty care:

Mental health resources:

Senior services:

Significant gaps:

This may matter both personally and pastorally.

15. Major Employers and the Local Economy

Major employers:

Important industries:

Economic strengths:

Economic pressures:

Employment patterns are changing because:

What does this mean for families in the congregation?

What does it mean for the wider community?

16. Community Institutions

Identify institutions that shape local life.

☐ Schools
☐ College/university
☐ Hospital
☐ Government
☐ Military installation
☐ Major employers
☐ Libraries
☐ Arts organizations
☐ Recreation organizations
☐ Social service agencies

☐ Civic organizations
☐ Other: _____

Three especially important institutions:

Why do they matter?

17. Other Faith Communities

A candidate should understand something about the religious ecology of the community.

Neighboring congregations:

Other Christian traditions:

Other faith communities:

Ecumenical relationships:

Cooperative ministries:

Relationships we wish were stronger:
Do not describe other congregations primarily as competition. They are neighbors in ministry.

18. Congregational Mission in the Community

Visit one or two places where the congregation's ministry becomes visible beyond its own building.

Ministry:

Location:

What happens there?

Who participates?

Community partners:

What has the congregation learned through this ministry?

What questions remain?

Do not try to visit every mission project. Choose those that reveal something important.

19. Let a Community Partner Speak

Consider including one brief conversation with someone who is not a member of the congregation.

Possible people:

school principal

nonprofit leader

community organizer

business owner

social service provider

neighborhood leader

local government official

college leader

mission partner

Person:

Organization:

Why this person?

Ask them:

What do you value about this community?

What challenges do you see?

What is changing?

What do you wish churches understood about this place?

Where do you see opportunities for partnership?

Then listen.

20. Do Not Script the Community Partner

Tell them why the candidate is visiting, subject to confidentiality.

Do not tell them what to say.

Avoid:

"Be sure to tell them about all the wonderful things our church does."

Instead:

"We would value your helping our candidate understand this community from your perspective."

The point is perspective, not endorsement.

21. Places of Gathering

Where do people encounter one another naturally?

☐ Coffee shops
☐ Restaurants
☐ Parks
☐ Libraries
☐ Sports fields
☐ Community centers
☐ Farmers markets
☐ Downtown
☐ Shopping centers
☐ Schools
☐ Senior centers
☐ Other: _____

A place worth stopping:

Why?
Perhaps have coffee there instead of simply driving past.

22. Places of Separation

Where do people in the community rarely encounter one another?
Consider:
geography
race
income
age
politics
housing patterns
schools
transportation
culture
We notice separation around:

How does the congregation experience this?

Does the congregation bridge any of these divisions?

Where might it?

This can become a significant ministry conversation.

23. Places of Possibility

Ask committee members:

Where do you see something emerging that gives you hope?

Place:

What is happening?

Who is involved?

Why does it matter?

Does the congregation have any relationship with it?

Do not limit the tour to problems. Mission begins with noticing gifts as well as needs.

24. Places We Have Overlooked

Ask:

What part of our community would we probably never think to show a candidate?

Why?

Could that omission tell us something?

Perhaps that place belongs on the tour.

25. What Not to Do

Avoid the narrated real-estate tour:

“That's the best subdivision.”

“Those are the good schools.”

“You'll want to stay away from that area.”

“That's where the poor people live.”

“This neighborhood is really coming back.”

Such comments may reveal assumptions more than information.

Speak carefully. Describe. Tell stories. Allow the candidate to notice.

26. Do Not Treat Poverty as Scenery

If the tour includes economically distressed areas, ask why.

What are we helping the candidate understand?

Are we connected with people who live there?

Do we know the community's strengths as well as its needs?

Could someone from the community tell the story better than we can?

Never make someone's difficult circumstances an exhibit on a church tour.

27. Do Not Hide Privilege Either

If significant wealth shapes the community, name it.

Where is wealth visible?

How does it shape community life?

How does it shape the congregation?

What opportunities does it create?

What tensions does it create?

Every place has realities that need honest interpretation.

28. Let the Candidate Notice

At some point, stop talking.

After several minutes, ask:

“What are you noticing?”

Candidate noticed:

Do not immediately explain what they noticed.

Ask:

“What makes that interesting to you?”

Curiosity can reveal how the candidate encounters place.

29. Listen to the Candidate's Questions

During the tour, note what the candidate asks about.

☐ People
☐ Schools
☐ Housing
☐ Poverty
☐ Business
☐ Mission
☐ Community partnerships
☐ Culture
☐ Recreation
☐ Demographics
☐ Other churches
☐ History
☐ Politics
☐ Growth
☐ Other: _____

Questions that stood out:

Do not evaluate the candidate because they failed to ask your favorite question.

Notice patterns.

30. Build the Route

Starting point:

Stop 1:

Why: _____

Stop 2:

Why: _____

Stop 3:

Why: _____

Stop 4:

Why: _____

Optional stop:

Ending point:

Total planned time:

Try to keep the tour focused.
A candidate does not need to see every road in town.

31. Decide Where to Get Out of the Car

A community cannot be experienced entirely through a windshield.

We will stop and walk at:

We will meet someone at:

We will eat or have coffee at:

We will allow independent exploration at:
Even one walk can change the character of the tour.

32. Stories We Want to Tell

Identify a few stories rather than a list of facts.

Story about the community's history:

Story about change:

Story about resilience:

Story about the congregation and community:

Story about something that did not work:
That last story may be as revealing as the successes.

33. Questions We Hope the Tour Raises

Do not try to answer these beforehand.

We hope the candidate begins wondering:

We hope we begin wondering:

A question we might explore later together:
The tour should create conversation, not conclude it.

34. Candidate's Independent Exploration

Consider giving the candidate a map and some time.

You might say:

“You have a couple of hours this afternoon with nothing scheduled. Feel free to explore anything that caught your attention today.”

Candidate has transportation:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Candidate has sufficient time:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Places they may want to revisit:

Do not ask for a report afterward. If something mattered, they will probably tell you.

35. If a Spouse or Partner Is Present

Ask what they need from the community tour.

They want to explore:

They would rather explore independently:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Information requested:

☐ Employment
☐ Housing
☐ Schools
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Arts/culture
☐ Other: _____

Do not make the spouse or partner spend three hours hearing the congregation's mission history unless they want to.

36. Confidentiality

If the candidate's presence is confidential:

☐ Community partners briefed
☐ Candidate introduced appropriately
☐ No photographs posted
☐ No social media

☐ Stops chosen with confidentiality in mind
☐ Candidate's current congregation protected

How will we introduce the candidate?
Plan this before entering a public place with them.

37. After the Tour

Do not immediately ask:

“So, do you like our town?”

Instead ask:

What did you notice?

What surprised you?

What gave you energy?

What raised questions?

Where would you like to spend more time?

Who would you like to talk with?

38. Move From Seeing to Ministry

Later—not necessarily in the car—ask:

Where did you notice people creating community?

Where did you notice gifts that a congregation might join rather than create?

Where did you notice pain or disconnection?

What made you curious?

What might you want to understand before imagining ministry?
Notice the order: understand before proposing.

39. What Did We Notice About Ourselves?

After the candidate leaves, the committee should reflect on the tour too.

Places we were eager to show:

Places we avoided:

Stories we told repeatedly:

Things the candidate noticed that we had stopped noticing:

Questions we could not answer:

Something we learned about our own relationship with the community:
The community tour may reveal as much about the congregation as about the community.

40. Community Tour Checklist

Before the tour:

☐ Candidate asked what they want to understand
☐ Purpose established
☐ Route planned
☐ Tour leader selected
☐ Travel time checked
☐ Stops confirmed
☐ Community partners confirmed
☐ Confidentiality reviewed
☐ Accessibility considered
☐ Weather checked
☐ Walking requirements explained
☐ Candidate has appropriate personal time afterward
☐ Practical relocation information available if requested
☐ Committee knows which stories matter
☐ Committee knows when to stop talking

41. Final Planning Question

Look at your route.

Then ask:

If a candidate experienced only this tour, what story would they hear about our community?

Would they encounter:

☐ Its strengths?
☐ Its wounds?
☐ Its diversity?
☐ Its history?
☐ Its changes?
☐ Its people?
☐ Its possibilities?
☐ The congregation's actual relationship with it?

What is missing?

Change the tour accordingly.

Leader's Note

It is surprisingly easy to give a candidate a community tour without helping them encounter the community.

We point out the hospital.

The high school.

The new subdivision.

The shopping center.

The best restaurant.

The park.

The place where the new development is going.

Then we return to the church.

The candidate has learned where things are, but may not have learned much about the place.

A pastor is called into a web of relationships, stories, gifts, wounds, institutions, histories, and hopes.

That place was already alive before the candidate arrived.

God was already there.

People were already loving their neighbors, solving problems, raising children, creating beauty, building businesses, caring for strangers, grieving losses, organizing communities, and imagining better futures.

The congregation is already part of that ecosystem too—although perhaps not always as deeply as it imagines.

So show the candidate the community. More importantly, help them encounter it.

Walk somewhere.

Meet someone.

Listen to a community partner.

Tell a story about something that failed as well as something that succeeded.

Let the candidate notice what you no longer notice.

And do not rush too quickly toward:

"What would you do here?"

A better question comes first:

"What are you beginning to notice?"

That is where ministry in a place begins.

FM 8.5

People the Candidate Should Meet

Purpose

An interview weekend should help a candidate encounter the congregation through people, not simply through committee descriptions.

More people do not necessarily produce better discernment.

The candidate does not need to meet every officer, every staff member, every committee chair, and every influential member. Too many introductions create exhaustion and turn the weekend into a succession of informal interviews.

Choose people because they can help the candidate understand something important.

Some can tell the congregation's story.

Some understand its culture.

Some know the community.

Some will work closely with the pastor.

Some can speak honestly about challenges.

Some represent voices the Search Committee may not hear regularly.

Some simply help the candidate experience what ordinary relationships in this congregation feel like.

The guiding question is:

Who can help the candidate understand the congregation, the community, and the ministry they may be called to share?

Use this resource with **FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner**, **FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules**, **FM 8.3 — Hospitality Checklist**, and **FM 8.4 — Community Tour Planner**.

1. Begin With Purpose

Before making a list of names, identify what the candidate still needs to understand.

The candidate needs to understand more about:

☐ Congregational culture
☐ Worship
☐ Staff relationships
☐ Governance
☐ Mission
☐ Community
☐ Congregational history
☐ Finances
☐ Children and youth

☐ Pastoral care
☐ Leadership expectations
☐ Presbytery or denominational relationships
☐ Congregational challenges
☐ Hopes for the future
☐ Other: _____

The most important areas are:

Now choose people who can help illuminate those areas.

2. Do Not Begin With Titles

Instead of asking:

Which officers should the candidate meet?

ask:

Whose perspective does the candidate need?

A person does not need an official position to understand the congregation deeply.

Someone who understands our congregation especially well:

Someone who understands our community especially well:

Someone who sees things differently from most of the Search Committee:

Someone whose perspective the candidate might otherwise miss:

3. The Session or Governing Board

In many congregations, the pastor will work closely with the session or governing board.

The candidate should understand that relationship.

Who should the candidate meet?

☐ Entire session/governing board
☐ Current officers
☐ Clerk

☐ Small representative group
☐ Selected leaders
☐ Not necessary during this visit

Participants:

What can they help the candidate understand?

What should the candidate be able to ask them?

Useful questions might include:

How do pastor and session work together here?

How are important decisions made?

What do you expect from your pastor?

What should your pastor be able to expect from you?

How do you work through significant differences?

4. Staff

If the pastor will supervise or work closely with staff, some staff interaction is important.

Staff the candidate should meet:

Why?

What should the candidate understand about staff culture?

What should staff have opportunity to ask?

The purpose is not another staff interview, but to begin understanding:

What might it be like for us to work together?

5. The Person Who Knows the Congregation's History

Every congregation has people who carry its memory.

Choose someone who can tell history without requiring the congregation to return to it.

Person:

What story can they tell?

Important moments they understand:

Why would their perspective help?

The candidate needs memory, not nostalgia presented as a job description.

6. Someone Who Understands the Congregation Now

The person who knows the past may not be the person who best understands the present.

Person:

They understand:

☐ Current culture
☐ Relationships
☐ Newer members
☐ Changing demographics
☐ Worship life
☐ Congregational expectations
☐ Emerging leadership
☐ Other: _____

What perspective can they provide?

7. A Newer Member

Longtime members know what the congregation intends to be. Newer members sometimes know what it actually feels like to encounter it.

Newer member:

How long have they been part of the congregation?

Why did they become involved?

What might they help the candidate understand?

A useful question for them might be:

What surprised you when you became part of this congregation?

8. A Longtime Member

Longtime members can help the candidate understand continuity, memory, and change.

Person:

Years connected with congregation:

What have they seen change?

What has remained important?

Choose someone capable of loving the congregation without pretending every change was a mistake.

9. Someone From a Younger Generation

If younger adults or emerging leaders are part of the congregation, their voices matter.

Person:

Perspective they bring:

What do they hope for?

What might the candidate learn from them?

Do not expect one younger person to represent an entire generation. They represent themselves.

10. Children and Youth Leadership

Depending upon the position, the candidate may benefit from meeting:

☐ Christian education leaders
☐ Youth leaders
☐ Parents
☐ Teachers
☐ Children's ministry leaders
☐ Young people themselves

Appropriate participants:

What should the candidate understand?

What should these leaders understand about the candidate?

Do not turn children or youth into an evaluation panel.

11. Mission Leaders

If the congregation says mission is central to its identity, the candidate should meet people who actually participate in it.

Ministry:

Person:

What do they do?

What have they learned?

What challenges do they see?

What do they hope comes next?

Look for practitioners, not merely committee chairs.

12. A Community Partner

One of the most valuable conversations may be with someone who does not belong to the congregation.

Consider:

☐ Nonprofit leader
☐ School leader
☐ Community organizer
☐ Social service provider
☐ Business leader

☐ Neighborhood leader
☐ Local government leader
☐ College/university leader
☐ Mission partner
☐ Other: _____

Person:

Organization:

Why this person?

What perspective can they offer?

Ask the community partner to help the candidate understand the community, not endorse the congregation.

13. Someone Who Receives the Congregation's Ministry

When appropriate and respectful, consider whether the candidate can hear from someone who experiences a ministry rather than leads it.

This requires care.

People receiving food, shelter, counseling, financial assistance, or other services should never become exhibits for a candidate visit.

Ask:

Is there a natural and dignified context for such a conversation?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Would the person genuinely want to participate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are there confidentiality concerns?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If there is any doubt, do not arrange it.

Dignity matters more than completing the candidate's tour.

14. Someone Who Understands the Congregation's Finances

At an advanced stage of discernment, the candidate should have access to honest financial information.

Appropriate person:

Possible roles:

☐ Treasurer
☐ Finance chair
☐ Administrator
☐ Stewardship leader
☐ Other: _____

Candidate should understand:

☐ Current budget
☐ Giving trends
☐ Reserves
☐ Debt
☐ Endowment
☐ Property obligations
☐ Staffing commitments
☐ Financial pressures
☐ Financial strengths
☐ Other: _____

Do not wait until the call is nearly complete to reveal significant financial realities.

15. Someone Who Understands the Building and Property

Buildings shape ministry more than congregations sometimes realize.

Person:

Candidate should understand:

☐ Building use
☐ Deferred maintenance
☐ Accessibility
☐ Community use
☐ Property income
☐ Major upcoming expenses
☐ Space limitations
☐ Unused space
☐ Future plans

☐ Other: _____

Important property realities:

A beautiful building and a burdensome building can be the same building. Tell the truth.

16. Someone Who Understands Pastoral Care

Who knows how the congregation experiences care?

Person:

They can help describe:

☐ Congregational expectations
☐ Hospital visitation
☐ Homebound members
☐ Funerals
☐ Crisis response
☐ Care teams
☐ Deacon ministry
☐ Shared pastoral care
☐ Boundaries
☐ Other: _____

What should the candidate understand?

This may reveal whether the congregation expects pastoral care to be shared ministry or primarily the pastor's responsibility.

17. Someone Who Understands Worship

Person:

Role:

Candidate should understand:

☐ Worship style
☐ Music
☐ Sacraments

☐ Liturgical traditions
☐ Preaching expectations
☐ Lay leadership
☐ Technology
☐ Worship planning
☐ Special services
☐ Other: _____

Important worship questions:

Do not confuse preference with theology. Help the candidate understand both.

18. Someone Who Can Speak About Difficult Seasons

Every congregation has experienced difficulty.

Perhaps:

pastoral conflict

financial stress

membership decline

leadership disagreement

staff transition

community crisis

building problems

denominational controversy

a painful pastoral departure

Choose someone who can speak about such experiences without recruiting the candidate into an old argument.

Person:

Experience they can help explain:

Why are they a trustworthy storyteller?

The candidate needs enough history to understand the system they may enter, not an invitation to become the newest participant in an unresolved dispute.

19. Someone Who Can Name the Congregation's Challenges

Ask:

Who loves this congregation enough to tell the truth about it?

Person:

They might help the candidate understand:

Why do we trust their perspective?

This person may be more useful than the congregation's most enthusiastic advocate.

20. Someone Who Can Name the Congregation's Gifts

Honesty is not limited to naming problems.

Person:

They recognize these gifts:

Stories they can tell:

The candidate should encounter genuine joy too.

21. Someone Who Disagrees With Us

Search Committees can develop a shared interpretation of the congregation.

That interpretation may be incomplete.

Ask:

Who sees this congregation differently from the Search Committee?

Person:

Their perspective differs around:

Would their perspective help the candidate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Why?

Difference is not automatically dysfunction. Sometimes it is information.

22. Someone Who Is Not an Insider

Who participates in congregational life but is not part of its primary leadership circle?

Person:

Their perspective:

What might they notice that leaders do not?

Candidates need to know more than how the congregation looks from the committee room.

23. Someone Who Joined—and Stayed

Person:

Why did they first come?

Why did they stay?

What helped them belong?

What was difficult?

This conversation can reveal congregational culture in surprisingly concrete ways.

24. Someone Who Has Leadership Potential

A candidate may want to know whether there are people with whom future ministry can be imagined.

Person:

Gifts we see:

Where they are already leading:

Why might this relationship matter?

Do not introduce them as “one of the people we hope you'll get more involved.” Let the relationship begin naturally.

25. Presbytery or Denominational Leadership

Depending upon polity and stage of the search, the candidate may need to meet someone from the presbytery or appropriate denominational body.

Person:

Role:

Purpose of meeting:

Candidate should understand:

☐ Presbytery expectations
☐ Support available
☐ Required processes
☐ Collegial relationships
☐ Regional ministry
☐ Other: _____

Follow denominational requirements regarding timing and participation.

26. Neighboring Clergy

Sometimes a conversation with a trusted neighboring pastor can help a candidate understand the wider ministry context.

Pastor:

Congregation:

Why this person?

What perspective can they provide?

Do not arrange this simply because pastors are expected to meet pastors. Have a reason.

27. Who Should the Candidate Not Meet Yet?

Some conversations may be important later but premature now.

People better saved for another stage:

Why?

Possible reasons:

confidentiality

limited weekend time

relationship not yet advanced enough

conversation belongs after a call

unnecessary duplication

candidate already has sufficient perspective

Not every useful conversation belongs in this weekend.

28. Beware of the Congregational Celebrity

Most congregations have people whom everyone insists the candidate simply must meet.

Ask:

Why?

If the answer is:

“Because everybody knows them.”

that may not be enough.

If the answer is:

“Because they understand something important about our congregation that no one else can explain as well,”

then make room.

29. Beware of the Unofficial Gatekeeper

Some people hold substantial informal influence.

The candidate may need to understand that reality.

But do not arrange a meeting simply so the gatekeeper can approve the candidate.

Is there an informal leader whose influence matters?

What should the candidate understand?

Is meeting them helpful?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Why?

A pastoral search should not secretly require permission from people who hold no formal authority.

30. Beware of the Sales Team

Do not choose only people who will tell the candidate:

“This is the greatest church anywhere.”

“Everyone will love you.”

“We don't really have conflicts.”

“The congregation is ready for change.”

Instead choose people who can say:

“Here is what I love.”

and

“Here is where we struggle.”

Both can be true.

31. Beware of the Grievance Meeting

The opposite problem is equally dangerous.

Do not use the candidate's visit as an opportunity for someone to unload years of frustration about:

the previous pastor

staff

session

worship

finances

denominational decisions

other members

If there is an unresolved issue the candidate genuinely needs to know, tell it responsibly.

Do not hand the candidate to someone who wants a new pastor to take their side.

32. Prepare the People Who Will Meet the Candidate

Before the visit, tell participants:

Why they are meeting the candidate.

What the candidate already knows.

What confidentiality requires.

Whether feedback will be requested.

How much time is available.

And remind them:

You do not need to interview the candidate. They may ask questions, but this is primarily a conversation.

33. Give Participants Better Questions

Instead of:

“Why do you want to come here?”

try:

“What are you becoming curious about as you learn about us?”

Instead of:

“What would you change?”

try:

“What would you want to understand before imagining change?”

Instead of:

“How would you get young people back?”

try:

“What have you learned about building relationships across generations?”

Instead of:

“What are your strengths and weaknesses?”

try:

“What kinds of ministry give you energy, and what kinds require more intentional effort?”

Keep the conversations consistent with the discernment process.

34. Prepare the Candidate Too

Tell the candidate whom they will meet and why.

Person/group:

Role/perspective:

Purpose:

The candidate should not walk into a room wondering:

Who are these twelve people, and are they evaluating me?

Clarity reduces anxiety.

35. Who Is Evaluating the Candidate?

Decide this explicitly.

These people provide formal feedback:

These people are meeting the candidate for conversation only:

Candidate has been told:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do not secretly turn every encounter into an evaluation.

36. If You Ask for Feedback

Ask participants about what they actually experienced.

Useful:

What did you notice in the conversation?

What gave you energy?

What raised a question for you?

What would you want to explore further?

Less useful:

Did you like them?

Do you think we should call them?

unless the person has a formal role in that decision.

37. Keep the Number Manageable

List everyone currently proposed for the weekend.

Friday:

Saturday morning:

Saturday afternoon:

Saturday evening:

Sunday:

Now count them.

Approximate number of people candidate will meet:

Ask:

Is every one of these encounters serving discernment?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If no, remove some.

38. Avoid the Parade of Faces

Ten meaningful conversations are usually more useful than fifty introductions.

A candidate who hears:

"This is Bill. This is Nancy. This is Fred. This is Ellen…"

for two days will eventually stop retaining names or context.

Choose encounters with enough time for actual conversation.

39. Create a Balanced Group

Look at the people you selected.

Do they include different:

☐ Ages
☐ Lengths of membership
☐ Ministry involvement
☐ Leadership roles
☐ Perspectives
☐ Experiences of the congregation
☐ Connections with the community
☐ Life circumstances
☐ Other: _____

The goal is not demographic tokenism, but to avoid presenting one narrow circle as though it were the whole congregation.

40. People the Candidate Wants to Meet

Ask:

"As you have learned about us, is there anyone—or any kind of person—you would particularly like to talk with while you are here?"

Candidate requests:

We can arrange:

We cannot arrange:

Alternative:

This reinforces mutual discernment.

41. Build the Weekend's People Plan

Person/Group	What They Help Candidate Understand	Setting	Time
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Now review it.

Whose voice is missing?

Who is unnecessary?

Who could wait?

42. After the Weekend

Ask the candidate during the closing conversation:

Was there anyone you met whose perspective was especially helpful?

Is there anyone else you would like to speak with if our discernment continues?

Follow up if appropriate.

43. Committee Reflection

After the candidate leaves:

Which encounter seemed especially meaningful?

Did anyone reveal something about the congregation we had not anticipated?

Did the candidate ask different questions of different people?

Did we notice where the candidate became especially curious?

Did we expose the candidate to too many people?

Whose perspective was missing?

Use what you learn to improve future visits.

44. Final Checklist

Before finalizing the people plan:

☐ Candidate will meet people they may actually work with
☐ Candidate will meet someone who knows the congregation's history
☐ Candidate will meet someone who understands the congregation now
☐ Candidate will encounter mission leadership
☐ Candidate will encounter the community beyond the congregation
☐ Candidate will hear both strengths and challenges
☐ Candidate will hear more than the Search Committee's perspective
☐ Candidate will not be subjected to unnecessary interviews
☐ Spouse/partner will not be evaluated

☐ Children will not be evaluated
☐ Confidentiality has been protected
☐ Participants know why they are involved
☐ Participants understand whether they are providing feedback
☐ Candidate knows whom they are meeting and why
☐ Candidate has been asked whom they want to meet
☐ Enough time remains for candidate privacy and reflection

Then ask:

Are we introducing the candidate to people—or introducing the candidate to the life of the congregation through people?

The second is the goal.

Leader's Note

There is a temptation during an interview weekend to introduce the candidate to everyone who matters. That phrase itself deserves examination.

Who matters?

The session chair matters.

So does the person who quietly serves meals every Tuesday.

The longtime member who remembers forty years of congregational history matters.

So does the person who joined eighteen months ago and remembers what it felt like to walk through the doors for the first time.

The treasurer may help the candidate understand the congregation's financial reality.

A community partner may help the candidate understand whether the congregation is actually known beyond its walls.

A staff member may reveal how leadership functions when no committee is watching.

A young adult may ask a question no one on the Search Committee thought to ask.

No one person represents the congregation. That is precisely why the candidate should encounter several perspectives.

But do not turn the weekend into a parade of representative people. Choose fewer people and give them enough time to talk.

Tell them they do not need to sell the congregation or interview the candidate. Ask them simply to tell the truth about the life they know.

Then let relationships begin.

Because somewhere in those ordinary conversations, candidate and congregation may begin to discover something no résumé, profile, or interview question can reveal:

What might it be like to share a life of ministry together?

FM 8.6

Welcoming Spouses and Families

Purpose

When a candidate visits, the call may belong to the pastor, but the transition rarely affects the pastor alone.

A spouse or partner may be considering employment, friendships, housing, schools, community, and the loss of a life they already know. Children may be wondering about friends, activities, schools, bedrooms, and whether they had any choice in moving at all.

Their questions matter.

But there is an important boundary:

The candidate is being considered for a call. The spouse, partner, and children are not.

Hospitality should help family members explore the community and imagine life there without turning them into additional sources of information about the candidate.

Use this resource with **FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner**, **FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules**, **FM 8.3 — Hospitality Checklist**, **FM 8.4 — Community Tour Planner**, and **FM 8.5 — People the Candidate Should Meet**.

1. Ask What Would Be Helpful

Do not assume every candidate wants family members included in an interview weekend.

Ask:

"Would it be helpful for your spouse, partner, or family to accompany you on this visit?"

If yes:

"What would make the visit useful for them?"

Candidate would like family to:

☐ Participate in the entire visit
☐ Participate in selected activities
☐ Explore the community independently
☐ Join primarily for meals and social activities
☐ Visit schools
☐ Explore housing
☐ Explore employment possibilities
☐ Explore recreation and community life
☐ Attend worship

☐ Other: _____

Family has requested:

Let them help shape their part of the weekend.

2. Clarify Expenses Before the Visit

Do not invite family members and leave the candidate wondering whether their expenses are covered.

Congregation will cover:

☐ Spouse/partner airfare
☐ Children's airfare
☐ Mileage
☐ Lodging
☐ Meals
☐ Rental vehicle
☐ Childcare
☐ Other: _____

Expenses not covered:

Candidate has been informed:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Hospitality begins with clarity.

3. Say This Explicitly

When spouse, partner, or family members are invited, tell the candidate:

"We want your family to have the opportunity to experience the community and ask the questions that matter to them. They are not being interviewed, and we do not expect them to participate in every activity."

Do not assume they already know this. Saying it can remove considerable anxiety.

4. The Spouse or Partner Is Not a Candidate

Do not evaluate:

personality

sociability

church involvement

theological knowledge

appearance

career choices

conversational style

enthusiasm about the congregation

Do not ask afterward:

“What did everybody think of the spouse?”

The answer should not be part of the committee's discernment.

5. Do Not Create a Spouse Interview

Questions that may sound friendly can become an interview:

“What do you see your role being in the church?”

“Do you sing in the choir?”

“What ministries do you enjoy?”

“Are you comfortable entertaining?”

“How do you feel about your spouse being available evenings?”

“Will you be involved with the women's/men's group?”

“What kind of pastor's spouse do you see yourself being?”

Do not ask them.

There is no position called pastor's spouse unless the congregation is actually calling and compensating two people.

6. No Unwritten Job Description

Some congregations still carry assumptions that the pastor's spouse will:

☐ Attend worship every Sunday
☐ Join the congregation
☐ Teach
☐ Sing in the choir
☐ Participate in mission
☐ Entertain
☐ Attend congregational events
☐ Host gatherings

☐ Provide unpaid ministry
☐ Be available to members
☐ Maintain a particular public image
If any of these expectations exist, the committee should recognize them.

Unspoken expectations we may carry:

Where did they come from?

Are they appropriate?

The spouse or partner is free to develop their own relationship—or no formal relationship—with the congregation.

7. Protect the Spouse or Partner From Being Used as a Reference

Do not ask:

“What is the candidate really like?”

“How do they handle stress?”

“What are their weaknesses?”

“Do they bring work home?”

“How do they deal with conflict?”

“Are they good with money?”

The candidate has provided references. Use them. The spouse or partner is not one.

8. Ask What They Need to Know

A spouse or partner may have questions the Search Committee has never considered.

They would like information about:

☐ Employment
☐ Housing
☐ Schools
☐ Childcare
☐ Health care

☐ Recreation
☐ Arts and culture
☐ Shopping
☐ Transportation
☐ Higher education
☐ Volunteer opportunities
☐ Social life
☐ Community organizations
☐ Faith communities
☐ Other: _____

Specific questions:

Find appropriate resources rather than trying to answer everything yourselves.

9. Employment

A spouse or partner's career may be a significant part of whether relocation is possible.

Information requested about:

Helpful contacts:

Local employers or resources:

Offer information without promising employment or suggesting that the spouse's career should be secondary to the candidate's call.

10. Housing

A family may need to know whether they can actually afford to live in the community.

They want:

☐ General housing information
☐ Rental information
☐ Home prices
☐ Neighborhood information
☐ Realtor contact
☐ Independent exploration
☐ Manse information if applicable

☐ Other: _____

Resource/contact:

Give them room to explore privately. Where a family chooses to live is their decision.

11. Schools

If children are involved, ask what information the family wants.

They would like:

☐ Public school information
☐ Private school information
☐ Preschool information
☐ Childcare information
☐ Special education information
☐ School visit
☐ Conversation with a local parent
☐ Independent research time
☐ Other: _____

Schools/resources:

Avoid pronouncing which schools are "good" or "bad." Provide information and let the family make its own judgments.

12. Children Are Not Candidates Either

Do not ask children:

"Are you excited about moving here?"

"Do you want your mom/dad to be our pastor?"

"What do you think of our church?"

"Would you like to go to school here?"

"Have you made any friends yet?"

These questions may seem harmless.

For a child who does not want to move, they can create pressure to perform enthusiasm.

Let children be children.

13. Give Children Choices

Depending upon age, children may want to:

☐ Attend some activities
☐ Skip adult dinners
☐ Explore recreation
☐ Visit a school
☐ Meet another young person
☐ Swim at the hotel
☐ Stay with a parent
☐ Have childcare
☐ Spend time online with friends back home
☐ Do nothing related to the church
All of those can be reasonable.

Family requests:

14. Meeting Other Children or Youth

This can be helpful when it happens naturally.

It should not become:

“Here are the kids who will be your friends.”

Instead, perhaps arrange:

a casual meal

playground time

a youth activity

recreation

an ordinary congregational event

Possible activity:

Participants:

Is participation optional?

☐ Yes
☐ No
It should be optional.

15. Childcare

If adult conversations require children to be elsewhere, offer childcare.

☐ Family asked whether childcare would help
☐ Qualified caregiver arranged
☐ Location clear
☐ Parents have caregiver contact information
☐ Allergies/needs addressed
☐ Age-appropriate activities available
☐ Costs covered
☐ Parents comfortable with arrangement

Never assume parents will leave their children with someone they just met. Ask.

16. Family Time

An interview weekend can consume the very time the candidate and family need to talk.

Schedule private family time.

Family time:

From _____ to _____

Possible uses:

exploring neighborhoods

eating alone

talking

resting

walking

visiting a school

imagining ordinary life

processing what each person is experiencing

Do not ask afterward what they discussed.

17. The Family May Be Having a Different Weekend

The candidate may be energized.

The spouse may be uncertain.

One child may be excited.

Another may be grieving the possibility of leaving friends.

That is normal. Do not expect the family to present a united public reaction.

Remember:

A family can be discerning together without feeling the same thing at the same time.

18. Hospitality for an Introvert

Not every spouse or partner enjoys a weekend of meeting strangers.

Ask rather than assuming.

They prefer:

☐ Small gatherings
☐ Larger gatherings
☐ Some independent time
☐ Mostly independent time
☐ Only selected meals
☐ Other: _____

A quiet spouse is not unfriendly, and an outgoing spouse is not more supportive. Personality is not candidacy.

19. Hospitality for a Family That Does Not Fit Traditional Expectations

Families take many forms.

Do not assume:

marital status

gender roles

parenting roles

employment arrangements

who handles household responsibilities

who is the primary caregiver

how a family participates in church

Use the names and relationships the candidate gives you.

Practice the same respect you would expect the pastor to extend to families in the congregation.

20. Confidentiality Applies to the Family

If the search is confidential:

☐ Family understands confidentiality needs
☐ Congregational participants understand confidentiality
☐ No family photographs are posted
☐ Children are not identified online
☐ No social media tagging
☐ School or community visits are handled appropriately
☐ Community contacts know only what they need to know

A careless social media post can expose a candidate's search through their family.

21. Do Not Photograph the Family Without Permission

Even during a nonconfidential visit:

☐ Ask before taking photographs
☐ Ask before sharing photographs
☐ Ask before posting photographs
☐ Never assume permission regarding children

Hospitality includes privacy.

22. Meals With Family

Not every meal needs to include the entire Search Committee.

Consider a rhythm such as:

Friday dinner

Candidate, family, and a few committee members.

Saturday lunch

Family alone.

Saturday dinner

Candidate and family with selected people.

Sunday lunch

As appropriate to the weekend.

Ask what works for them.

23. Conversation at Meals

When family members are present, talk about ordinary things.

Good conversation may include:

hobbies

community life

travel

food

recreation

books

schools

local traditions

things people enjoy about living there

Not every conversation needs to return to "Tell us more about your sense of call." Let dinner be dinner.

24. Avoid Recruiting the Spouse

Do not say:

"You would be perfect for our choir."

"We really need someone to help with youth."

"You'll love our women's group."

"We could certainly use your skills."

Even when intended as welcome, these comments can sound like assignments.

If the spouse or partner eventually joins the congregation, let vocation and participation emerge in their own time.

25. Avoid Recruiting the Children

Do not tell children:

"We need more kids your age."

"You'll love our youth group."

"You can help us get the youth program going again."

A pastor's children do not exist to improve congregational demographics.

26. Do Not Make the Family a Symbol

Avoid comments such as:

“It would be wonderful to have a young family in the manse again.”

“Our congregation really needs children around.”

“People will be so excited to see your family.”

These comments turn people into congregational symbols. Welcome them as people.

27. Boundaries Around the Pastor's Family

The interview weekend is a good time for the committee to examine its own expectations.

Do we expect access to the pastor's family?

Do we expect the pastor's home to function as congregational space?

Do we expect the spouse to know confidential pastoral information?

Do we expect children to behave differently because their parent is the pastor?

Do we expect the family to attend most congregational activities?

Are those expectations appropriate?

The healthiest time to challenge unhealthy expectations is before a new pastor arrives.

28. If There Is a Manse

A manse makes the congregation part of the family's housing life.

Be especially attentive to boundaries.

☐ Family has toured the manse privately
☐ Known maintenance needs disclosed
☐ Utilities explained
☐ Furnishing expectations explained
☐ Pet policies explained if applicable
☐ Privacy expectations discussed
☐ Congregational access clarified

☐ Yard maintenance clarified
☐ Improvements and repairs clarified
☐ Family has opportunity to ask questions privately
The manse is church property.

If the pastor lives there, it is also their home.

Those truths must coexist.

29. Health Care and Other Personal Needs

A candidate or family member may need information about medical specialists, accessibility, therapy, or other services.

Provide requested information without asking why it is needed.

Information requested:

Resource provided:

They do not owe the Search Committee a medical explanation.

30. Family Questions About the Congregation

Spouses or partners may ask difficult questions.

For example:

“How much evening work do you expect?”

“How often do pastors get interrupted on days off?”

“How did you treat the previous pastor's family?”

“Do members tend to contact the pastor at home?”

“What happens when the pastor takes vacation?”

“How much privacy will our family actually have?”

Answer honestly.

These are not secondary questions. They concern whether the call can be lived sustainably.

31. Questions the Committee Should Be Ready to Answer

What expectations do we have about the pastor's availability?

How are days off protected?

How is vacation handled?

How are emergencies handled when the pastor is away?

How are boundaries around the pastor's home respected?

What expectations exist for spouse/partner participation?

What expectations exist for children?

If the committee cannot answer these questions, that is useful information.

32. Do Not Ask the Family to Decide During the Visit

Avoid:

“So, could you see yourselves living here?”

“What do the kids think?”

“Are you excited?”

“Does this feel like home?”

They may not know and may need to talk privately. Give them that dignity.

33. When the Family Is Not Enthusiastic

If a spouse, partner, or child appears quiet or uncertain, do not diagnose it.

Do not tell the committee:

“I don't think the spouse wants to come.”

You do not know.

Travel is tiring.

New people are tiring.

Moving is complicated.

The family may be processing significant change.

Allow the candidate to manage their own family discernment.

34. When the Spouse or Partner Asks to Speak Privately

If they want practical information, provide it.

If they begin discussing the candidate or their marriage, be careful.

The Search Committee should not become a counseling resource or gather information indirectly about the candidate.

A useful response may be:

“I want to respect both you and the candidate, and I don't want to turn a private conversation with you into information for the search. If there is something you believe the committee needs to know, it would be best for us to think together about the appropriate way for that to be communicated.”

Protect the relationship.

35. After the Family Leaves

Do not include a section in the committee debrief called:

“Thoughts about the family.”

Instead ask only whether the committee fulfilled its hospitality responsibilities.

Did we provide what they requested?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did they have sufficient private time?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we inadvertently place expectations on them?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we respect their privacy?

☐ Yes
☐ No

What should we do differently next time?

36. What Can Be Relevant to Discernment?

There is an important distinction.

The committee should not evaluate the family.

But the candidate may appropriately raise family considerations that affect whether the call is possible.

For example:

spouse/partner employment

housing affordability

schools

caregiving responsibilities

accessibility

timing of relocation

Those become part of mutual discernment because the candidate identifies them as relevant.

Let the candidate determine what family information belongs in the search.

37. Before the Visit Checklist

☐ Candidate asked whether family will accompany
☐ Family expenses clarified
☐ Family interests requested
☐ Housing information available if requested
☐ Employment resources available if requested
☐ School information available if requested
☐ Childcare offered if appropriate
☐ Dietary needs requested
☐ Accessibility needs requested
☐ Private family time scheduled
☐ Transportation independence considered
☐ Confidentiality reviewed
☐ Participants reminded family is not being interviewed
☐ No assumptions made about spouse/partner participation
☐ No assumptions made about children's participation

38. During the Visit Checklist

☐ Family welcomed by name
☐ Family understands the schedule
☐ Participation remains optional where possible
☐ No covert spouse interview

☐ No questions to children about the call
☐ No recruiting spouse into ministry
☐ No recruiting children into programs
☐ Family has private time
☐ Candidate and family have time together
☐ Practical questions answered honestly
☐ Privacy respected
☐ Photographs handled appropriately
☐ Schedule adjusted if family needs change

39. Before They Leave

Ask the candidate and family:

“Is there anything you hoped to learn about living here that we have not helped you explore?”

Additional information requested:

Person responsible:

Follow-up date:

Then say thank you.

Do not ask for their verdict.

40. A Word to Congregational Participants

Before congregation members meet the candidate's family, it may be helpful to say:

Please welcome them as guests. They are not being interviewed. They do not have a role they are expected to fill in the congregation. Let them ask questions, explore the community, and enjoy getting to know people. Please do not ask them whether they want to move here or what they think about the call.

That simple instruction can prevent many awkward moments.

41. Final Reflection

Before the weekend, ask as a committee:

Are we welcoming a family?

or

Are we evaluating a package?

Then ask:

Would we be comfortable if a congregation treated our own spouse, partner, or children the way we are planning to treat this family?

If not, change the plan.

Leader's Note

Congregations sometimes say they are calling a pastor and a family.

They are not. They are calling a pastor. The distinction matters.

A spouse or partner has a vocation of their own. They may have a career they love, relationships they value, a faith community of their own, or no desire to become deeply involved in the congregation their spouse serves.

Children have lives of their own too. They did not choose to enter a pastoral search. They should not inherit a congregational job description because their parent accepts a call.

Yet the family matters profoundly.

A call that cannot be lived by the household may not be a sustainable call for the pastor.

Practice generous hospitality.

Help them understand the community.

Answer their questions.

Give them information.

Give them choices.

Give them privacy.

Give them time together.

Most importantly, give them freedom from the expectation that they must become anything for your congregation.

Welcome the pastor's family as people to be received, not positions to be filled.

FM 8.7

Candidate Information Packet Checklist

Purpose

By the time a candidate comes for an interview weekend, they should not still be assembling basic information about the congregation.

They should have enough information to arrive prepared for deeper discernment.

A good Candidate Information Packet answers practical and factual questions before the visit so that time together can be spent on questions that require conversation:

Who are you becoming as a congregation?

What is ministry actually like here?

What would you expect of me?

What could I expect of you?

What might we discover together?

The packet should be useful without becoming overwhelming. Give the candidate what they need to understand the congregation, community, position, and visit, and make additional information easy to request.

1. Begin With What the Candidate Already Has

Before assembling the packet, identify what has already been provided.

☐ Ministry Discernment Profile or denominational profile
☐ Position description
☐ Congregational website
☐ Search Committee contact information
☐ Terms of Call information
☐ Congregational statistics
☐ Other: _____

Candidate already has:

Do not resend documents simply because they appear on a checklist.

2. Decide What This Packet Is For

This packet should help the candidate prepare for:

☐ Interview weekend
☐ Community exploration
☐ Staff conversations
☐ Leadership conversations

☐ Worship
☐ Terms of Call conversation
☐ Relocation questions
☐ Family discernment
☐ Candidating weekend
☐ Other: _____

The candidate most needs to understand:

Build the packet around that purpose.

3. Welcome Letter

Include a brief welcome from the Search Committee.

It should include:

☐ Expression of welcome
☐ Purpose of the visit
☐ Dates
☐ Primary committee contact
☐ Invitation to ask questions
☐ Reminder that the weekend serves the candidate's discernment too

Keep it brief. This is not another opportunity to sell the congregation.

4. Weekend Schedule

Provide the schedule before the candidate travels.

Include:

☐ Arrival arrangements
☐ Lodging
☐ Meals
☐ Meeting times
☐ Meeting locations
☐ Participants
☐ Community tour
☐ Personal time
☐ Worship
☐ Family activities if applicable
☐ Closing conversation
☐ Departure arrangements

☐ Contact numbers

Schedule sent:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Candidate invited to suggest changes:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Use **FM 8.1 — Interview Weekend Planner** and **FM 8.2 — Sample Weekend Schedules**.

5. Search Committee Information

The candidate has probably met committee members on Zoom.

Help them remember who is who.

Consider including:

☐ Names
☐ Photographs
☐ Brief biographies
☐ Congregational involvement
☐ Committee roles
☐ Contact information where appropriate

Information included:

Keep biographies brief; the candidate does not need everyone's résumé.

6. Congregational Profile

Include the congregation's current official profile.

☐ Ministry Discernment Profile or equivalent
☐ Position description
☐ Congregational mission statement
☐ Vision or values
☐ Basic membership information
☐ Worship attendance
☐ Staff structure
☐ Ministry overview
☐ Other: _____

If the candidate already has these materials, do not duplicate them.

7. A Brief Congregational Story

Profiles provide information; stories provide context.

Consider a one- or two-page overview addressing:

Where have we come from?

What has shaped us?

What has changed recently?

What gives us life?

What are we learning?

What do we hope comes next?

If this material already exists in the Ministry Discernment Profile, use it rather than creating a second, competing version of the congregation.

8. Congregational Leadership

Help the candidate understand how leadership is organized.

Include as appropriate:

☐ Session/governing board roster
☐ Committee structure
☐ Organizational chart
☐ Staff structure
☐ Deacon structure
☐ Ministry teams
☐ Other: _____

Most useful document:

The goal is orientation, not organizational archaeology.

9. Staff Information

If the candidate may supervise or work closely with staff, include:

☐ Staff names
☐ Titles
☐ Basic responsibilities
☐ Full-time/part-time status
☐ Reporting relationships
☐ Organizational chart
☐ Other: _____

Candidate will meet:

Information provided beforehand:

Avoid sharing confidential personnel information.

10. Worship Information

Help the candidate understand the congregation's worship life.

Consider:

☐ Recent worship bulletin
☐ Worship schedule
☐ Communion practices
☐ Music information
☐ Livestream link
☐ Recent sermon links
☐ Seasonal worship information
☐ Other: _____

Best resources:

One or two representative worship bulletins are usually more useful than six months of them.

11. If the Candidate Will Preach

Provide everything necessary well in advance.

☐ Scripture
☐ Who selects Scripture
☐ Sermon length expectations
☐ Worship theme if applicable
☐ Order of worship
☐ Candidate's liturgical responsibilities
☐ Worship style
☐ Robing expectations
☐ Microphone information
☐ Technology information
☐ Deadline for sermon title
☐ Deadline for bulletin information
☐ Worship planning contact
☐ Arrival time Sunday

☐ Preparation space

Person responsible:

Do not make the candidate discover local worship customs ten minutes before the service.

12. Ministry Information

Provide enough information to show how the congregation actually lives its ministry.

Consider brief information about:

☐ Christian formation
☐ Children
☐ Youth
☐ Older adults
☐ Pastoral care
☐ Mission
☐ Community partnerships
☐ Fellowship
☐ Small groups
☐ Music
☐ Stewardship
☐ Other: _____

Ministries most important for candidate to understand:

Do not include a brochure for every ministry. Curate.

13. Mission and Community Partnerships

If these are important to congregational identity, include:

☐ Brief ministry descriptions
☐ Partner organizations
☐ Community ministry locations
☐ Current initiatives
☐ Links to partner websites where useful
☐ Other: _____

Candidate will visit:

Candidate will meet:

The packet provides context; the encounter provides the story.

14. Congregational Calendar

A calendar can reveal the actual rhythm of congregational life.

Consider including:

☐ Current month
☐ Upcoming month
☐ Annual ministry calendar
☐ Major seasonal events

What will this help the candidate understand?

A calendar with activities every night may raise an important question.

So may an almost empty one.

Let the calendar speak honestly.

15. Recent Newsletter

Consider including:

☐ Most recent newsletter
☐ Recent weekly email
☐ Other ordinary congregational communication

These can reveal:

what receives attention

how the congregation communicates

what ministries are active

what language the congregation uses

what members are being invited to do

Included:

One recent example is usually enough.

16. Financial Information

At an advanced stage of discernment, candidates should have sufficient financial information to understand the congregation they may be called to serve.

Consider:

☐ Current annual budget
☐ Previous year's actual income and expenses

☐ Current giving trends
☐ Reserve information
☐ Endowment information
☐ Debt
☐ Major capital needs
☐ Significant property obligations
☐ Other relevant financial information

Documents provided:

Questions should be directed to:

Do not bury significant financial concerns in a spreadsheet and assume disclosure has occurred. Important realities deserve conversation.

17. Terms of Call

Provide current information as appropriate to the stage of discernment.

☐ Salary or effective salary
☐ Housing/manse
☐ Benefits
☐ Retirement/pension
☐ Medical coverage
☐ Vacation
☐ Study leave
☐ Continuing education funds
☐ Professional expenses
☐ Moving expenses
☐ Sabbatical policy if applicable
☐ Other: _____

Terms of Call document included:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Terms still under discussion:

Candidates should not have to guess whether a call is financially possible.

18. Position Description

Include the most current version.

☐ Position title

☐ Accountability
☐ Responsibilities
☐ Staff relationships
☐ Leadership expectations
☐ Hours/status
☐ Other expectations

Date position description was last reviewed:

Ask:

Does this position description describe the ministry we have actually been discussing with the candidate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If not, resolve that before the visit.

19. Personnel Policies

At an appropriate stage, make relevant policies available.

Possible documents:

☐ Personnel policy
☐ Vacation policy
☐ Sabbatical policy
☐ Parental/family leave
☐ Expense reimbursement
☐ Sexual misconduct prevention policy
☐ Social media policy
☐ Building-use policy
☐ Other: _____

Do not overwhelm the candidate with a policy manual unless it is relevant to the current stage.

You can simply say:

Additional policies are available if you would like to review them.

20. Building and Property Information

If property significantly affects ministry, provide useful context.

Consider:

☐ Building map
☐ Property overview

☐ Manse information
☐ Major maintenance needs
☐ Planned capital projects
☐ Community use of facilities
☐ Rental arrangements
☐ Accessibility information
☐ Other: _____

Significant property matter candidate should understand:

If there is a $700,000 roof problem, it is not a minor footnote.

21. Community Overview

Provide enough information for orientation without replacing the community tour.

Possible resources:

☐ Community map
☐ Basic demographic information
☐ City/town website information
☐ School information
☐ Major employers
☐ Health care
☐ Recreation
☐ Cultural resources
☐ Local news sources
☐ Community organizations
☐ Other: _____

Most useful resources:

Avoid assembling a relocation encyclopedia. Give the candidate a starting point.

22. Community Demographics

If useful, include a brief snapshot.

Possible information:

☐ Population
☐ Age distribution
☐ Racial/ethnic demographics
☐ Household income
☐ Poverty rates

☐ Housing
☐ Educational attainment
☐ Population growth/decline
☐ Other: _____

Source:

Date of information:

Use current, reliable information.

Do not overwhelm the candidate with statistics that have no connection to the congregation's ministry.

23. Presbytery or Denominational Information

Include information that helps the candidate understand the wider church context.

☐ Presbytery website/information
☐ Presbytery staff contacts
☐ Presbytery map
☐ Regional ministry information
☐ Denominational requirements
☐ Candidate examination/process information
☐ Other: _____

Candidate will meet:

Role:

The candidate is discerning not only a relationship with a congregation, but entry into a wider system of ministry.

24. Congregational History

Include enough history to provide context.

Consider:

☐ Brief written history
☐ Significant pastoral transitions
☐ Major building changes
☐ Important ministry developments
☐ Significant congregational changes
☐ Other: _____

Avoid sending a seventy-five-page anniversary history unless the candidate asks for it.

Most relevant history:

25. Significant Recent History

Some information matters because it affects the congregation the candidate may actually enter.

Candidate should understand:

☐ Previous pastoral transition
☐ Significant staff changes
☐ Congregational conflict/differences
☐ Financial changes
☐ Membership changes
☐ Major mission changes
☐ Building decisions
☐ Denominational issues
☐ Other: _____

What should be explained in conversation rather than merely documented?

A document cannot carry every difficult story well.

26. Congregational Challenges

Do not create a packet containing only good news.

Ask:

What challenge would feel like a surprise if the candidate discovered it six months after accepting the call?

That probably belongs somewhere in the discernment process.

Possible areas:

☐ Financial pressure
☐ Deferred maintenance
☐ Staff issues
☐ Leadership fatigue
☐ Attendance decline
☐ Generational differences

☐ Worship tensions
☐ Community change
☐ Unresolved grief
☐ Other: _____

Not everything belongs in a packet. Everything significant belongs in the discernment.

27. Congregational Strengths

Likewise, make visible what genuinely gives the congregation life.

Strengths we hope the candidate experiences:

Evidence of those strengths:

People or ministries through whom the candidate may encounter them:

Avoid adjectives without evidence. Instead of saying, “We are a very mission-oriented church,” show what that means.

28. Information for Spouse or Partner

If requested, provide:

☐ Employment resources
☐ Housing information
☐ School information
☐ Childcare information
☐ Health care information
☐ Recreation
☐ Cultural resources
☐ Higher education
☐ Community organizations
☐ Other: _____

Requested information:

Use **FM 8.6 — Welcoming Spouses and Families**.

29. Information for Children and Families

If appropriate:

☐ School links
☐ Youth activities
☐ Parks
☐ Recreation
☐ Libraries
☐ Community activities
☐ Childcare
☐ Other: _____

Do not create a promotional package designed to convince children that moving will be wonderful. Provide useful information.

30. Emergency and Practical Information

Candidate should have:

☐ Primary committee contact
☐ Backup contact
☐ Hotel phone/address
☐ Church address
☐ Transportation contact
☐ Travel information
☐ Parking instructions
☐ Schedule
☐ Emergency changes procedure

Primary contact:

Phone:

Backup:

Phone:

31. What Not to Include

Usually avoid:

☐ Every church brochure
☐ Every newsletter from the past year
☐ Complete committee minutes
☐ Old directories unless needed
☐ Outdated strategic plans
☐ Promotional materials no longer reflecting reality
☐ Internal personnel information
☐ Confidential congregational information
☐ Documents the candidate already has
☐ Material included simply because “we've always sent it”

Ask of every item: What will this help the candidate understand? If there is no good answer, leave it out.

32. Digital or Printed?

Ask the candidate what they prefer.

Candidate prefers:

☐ Digital
☐ Printed
☐ Both

Digital materials will be:

☐ Emailed
☐ Shared through secure folder
☐ Other: _____

Printed packet will be:

☐ Mailed
☐ Available at hotel
☐ Given upon arrival

Whenever possible, send substantive information before the candidate travels. The candidate should not spend Friday night reading a binder.

33. Organizing the Digital Packet

Do not send eighteen attachments named:

scan004.pdf

document2finalFINAL.pdf

newsletternew.pdf

Use clear names.

For example:

01 — Weekend Schedule

02 — Ministry Discernment Profile

03 — Position Description

04 — Staff and Leadership

05 — Current Budget

06 — Terms of Call

07 — Worship Information

08 — Community Information

The candidate should be able to find something quickly.

34. Create a Simple Contents Page

Candidate Information Packet

Welcome

Weekend

Congregation

Leadership and Staff

Ministry

Worship

Financial Information

Terms of Call

Community

Wider Church

Additional Resources

Keep navigation simple.

35. Use Links Wisely

Some information is better linked than attached.

Consider links for:

☐ Congregational website
☐ Worship livestream
☐ Presbytery website
☐ Community website
☐ School district
☐ Community demographics
☐ Partner organizations
☐ Local news
☐ Housing resources
☐ Other: _____

Do not create a page containing forty links. Curate what is useful.

36. Check Every Link

Before sending:

☐ Congregational website works
☐ Staff page is current
☐ Worship links work

☐ Livestream works
☐ Community links work
☐ Presbytery links work
☐ Partner links work
☐ No private documents are publicly accessible unintentionally
A dead link is a small thing. Ten dead links suggest nobody checked.

37. Check for Outdated Information

Before including a document, check:

Date:

Still accurate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Needs explanation?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Pay particular attention to:

staff

budget

membership

worship times

ministry programs

Terms of Call

strategic plans

community statistics

Do not make the candidate determine which version is current.

38. Check for Contradictions

Compare:

☐ Ministry Discernment Profile
☐ Position description
☐ Website
☐ Budget
☐ Staff information
☐ Search Committee conversations

☐ Terms of Call

Ask:

Are we telling the same basic story in all of these places?

Inconsistencies:

Need clarification before sending:

Contradictions may reveal issues the committee itself needs to resolve.

39. What Requires Conversation?

Some information should never be left for the candidate to interpret alone.

Identify it.

We need to discuss:

Who will initiate the conversation?

When?

Examples may include:

financial challenges

difficult pastoral history

staff changes

significant congregational differences

property problems

changing expectations

unresolved transition issues

A spreadsheet cannot answer, “What does this mean for ministry?” People need to talk.

40. Invite Questions

End the packet with an invitation:

As you review these materials, please note anything you would like to understand more fully. We do not expect you to study everything before you arrive. These resources are here to help you prepare for the conversations you want to have with us.

That turns the packet from homework into a resource for discernment.

41. Ask the Candidate What Is Missing

A few days before the visit:

"As you have reviewed the information we sent, is there anything else you would like to have before you come?"

Candidate requested:

Person responsible:

Sent:

☐ Yes
☐ No

The candidate may identify something the committee overlooked.

42. Candidate Information Packet Checklist

Essential

☐ Welcome/contact information
☐ Weekend schedule
☐ Ministry Discernment Profile or equivalent
☐ Position description
☐ Search Committee information
☐ Staff information
☐ Current budget/appropriate financial information
☐ Terms of Call information
☐ Worship information
☐ Community orientation
☐ Travel/lodging information

☐ Expense information

Depending Upon the Search

☐ Leadership structure
☐ Recent newsletter
☐ Congregational calendar
☐ Ministry overview
☐ Mission partnerships
☐ Property information
☐ Personnel policies
☐ Congregational history
☐ Presbytery information
☐ Community demographics
☐ Housing information
☐ School information
☐ Family resources
☐ Other: _____

43. Final Review

Before sending the packet, have one committee member review the entire collection as though they were the candidate.

Ask:

Is anything missing?

Is anything unnecessary?

Is anything outdated?

Is anything contradictory?

Is anything difficult to find?

Is there anything here we would rather explain than simply send?

Does the packet tell the truth about us?

Then ask the most practical question:

If I received this packet, would I know what I needed to know—and still have enough energy to come meet these people?

If not, remove something.

Leader's Note

Search Committees sometimes confuse transparency with volume.

They assemble binders.

Budgets.

Annual reports.

Newsletters.

Policies.

Directories.

Histories.

Strategic plans.

Minutes.

Brochures.

The candidate receives enough material to prepare for comprehensive examinations. That is not transparency.

Transparency means the candidate can readily discover what they need to understand the call.

Some of that belongs in documents.

Some belongs on the congregation's website.

Some belongs in a conversation.

And some will only become visible when the candidate arrives and begins meeting people.

The Candidate Information Packet should make those encounters richer.

It should provide enough context that the candidate need not spend the weekend asking questions whose answers could have been read beforehand, without attempting to answer every question.

The most important questions still require people sitting across from one another.

So curate the packet. Keep it current. Tell the truth. Make additional information easy to obtain.

And remember what all of this information is for:

Not to persuade the candidate to come, but to give them what they need to discern whether they should.

FM 8.8

Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheet

Purpose

An interview weekend creates a great deal of information.

Some comes from formal conversations. Much does not.

You notice how the candidate relates to staff. What questions they ask while touring the community. What seems to give them energy. How they respond when someone disagrees. Whether their curiosity deepens as the weekend unfolds. What happens around a dinner table when no interview question has been asked.

Those observations matter.

But immediately after an intensive weekend, impressions can easily become conclusions:

“I really liked them.”

“I just didn't feel a connection.”

“They would fit here.”

“Something bothered me.”

Those responses matter, but they should not become conclusions before they are understood.

This worksheet helps committee members move from experience to observation, from observation to reflection, and from reflection to discernment.

Complete it individually before the Search Committee discusses the weekend. Notice first. Interpret carefully. Discern together.

1. Before You Begin

Do not complete this worksheet in the car while the candidate is leaving.

Give yourself enough time to reflect.

Try to distinguish among:

What I observed

What actually happened.

What I interpreted

What I think it may mean.

What I felt

My own response to the experience.

What I still need to understand

Questions that remain.

All four can be useful. They are not the same thing.

2. First Impressions

Without trying to evaluate the candidate yet:

What stays with you most strongly from the weekend?

What surprised you?

What gave you energy?

What gave you pause?

What are you still thinking about?

3. What Did You Actually Observe?

List several specific moments.

Avoid conclusions such as:

“The candidate is a good listener.”

Instead describe what happened:

“When the staff member described a difficult experience, the candidate asked two follow-up questions and did not interrupt.”

Observation 1

Observation 2

Observation 3

Observation 4

Observation 5

Now ask:

What am I tempted to conclude from these observations?

4. Where Did You See the Candidate Most Fully Themselves?

Think beyond the formal interview.

Perhaps it was:

☐ During a committee conversation
☐ At dinner
☐ With staff
☐ During the community tour
☐ With congregational members
☐ With a community partner
☐ During worship
☐ In an unexpected moment
☐ Other: _____

What happened?

What did you notice?

Why does that moment matter to you?

5. What Gave the Candidate Energy?

Notice moments when the candidate seemed particularly engaged or curious.

Topic, person, or experience:

What did you observe?

Another:

What did you observe?

A pattern I noticed:

Do not assume enthusiasm means call. Notice it.

6. What Seemed to Give the Candidate Pause?

Topic, person, or experience:

What did you observe?

Did the candidate name a concern?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes:

Did I infer a concern the candidate did not name?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes:

Keep those categories separate.

7. What Questions Did the Candidate Ask?

Think across the entire weekend.

The candidate asked about:

☐ Worship
☐ Mission
☐ Community
☐ Staff
☐ Leadership
☐ Congregational culture
☐ Pastoral care
☐ Children and youth
☐ Theology
☐ Finances
☐ Property
☐ History
☐ Congregational challenges
☐ Presbytery/wider church
☐ Terms of Call
☐ Family/relocation
☐ Other: _____

Questions I particularly remember:

What seemed to make the candidate curious?

Were there questions I expected but did not hear?

Does that matter?

Do not assume that a question not asked indicates a lack of interest; the candidate may already know the answer.

8. How Did the Candidate Listen?

Notice rather than rate.

I observed the candidate:

☐ Asking follow-up questions
☐ Allowing people to finish
☐ Remembering things said earlier
☐ Connecting one person's story with another
☐ Asking for clarification
☐ Making space for quieter people
☐ Responding to emotion
☐ Becoming curious when something unexpected emerged
☐ Other: _____

A moment that illustrates how the candidate listened:

What would I like to explore further?

9. How Did the Candidate Tell Their Own Story?

What stories did the candidate tell?

What did those stories reveal about what matters to them?

Did their stories deepen things we had heard in earlier interviews?

Did anything feel different from earlier conversations?

If so, what?

10. Leadership

Think about what you actually observed or heard.

Where did you notice leadership?

How did the candidate relate to people with formal authority?

How did they relate to people without formal authority?

How did they respond when another person had expertise they did not have?

What questions about leadership remain?

11. Staff Relationships

If the candidate met staff:

What did you notice?

What seemed natural?

What raised questions?

Did the candidate appear interested in understanding staff roles before describing how they would lead?

What should we explore further?

Do not confuse immediate chemistry with the capacity to build a healthy working relationship.

12. Congregational Relationships

How did the candidate engage longtime members?

Newer members?

Younger people?

People whose perspectives differed from theirs?

People they had not expected to meet?

What patterns did you notice?

13. Community

Think about **FM 8.4 — Community Tour Planner**.

What did the candidate notice about the community?

What questions did they ask?

Where did they become curious?

Did they move quickly toward solutions?

Or toward understanding?

What did you learn about how this candidate encounters a place?

14. Mission

When did the conversation turn toward mission?

What seemed to animate the candidate?

Did the candidate primarily talk about:

☐ Programs
☐ Relationships
☐ Community needs
☐ Community assets
☐ Congregational gifts
☐ Partnerships
☐ Evangelism
☐ Justice
☐ Service
☐ Spiritual formation
☐ Other: _____

What pattern do I notice?

What would I like to understand better?

15. Theology in Conversation

Do not ask only whether you agreed with the candidate.

Ask how theology functioned in their thinking.

Where did theological convictions become visible?

How did Scripture enter the conversation?

How did the candidate speak about God?

Church?

Grace?

Vocation or call?

What theological questions remain?

16. Spiritual Formation

What did you notice about the candidate's spiritual life?

What practices did they describe?

How did they speak about prayer?

Discernment?

Their own continuing formation?

What would you like to understand more deeply?

17. Differences

Think about moments when the candidate encountered a perspective different from their own.

What happened?

How did the candidate respond?

Did they become:

☐ Curious
☐ Defensive
☐ Quiet
☐ Thoughtful
☐ Persuasive
☐ Dismissive
☐ Other: _____

What did you actually observe?

What are you interpreting from it?

18. Difficult Questions

Did the candidate ask us anything difficult?

☐ Yes
☐ No

What?

How did we respond?

Did we become defensive?

Did we answer honestly?

Did we avoid anything?

What might the candidate now be wondering about us?

This section is about the committee as much as the candidate.

19. When We Were Honest About Our Challenges

Think about **FM 5.4 — Speaking Honestly About Strengths and Challenges**.

What challenge did we discuss?

How did the candidate respond?

What questions did they ask?

Did they:

☐ Listen
☐ Seek context
☐ Move quickly toward a solution
☐ Ask about what we have learned
☐ Ask about our responsibility
☐ Ask about previous attempts
☐ Other: _____

What did their response help us understand?

20. Worship

If the candidate attended worship:

What did you notice about their participation?

What questions did they ask afterward?

What seemed to interest them?

If the candidate preached or led worship:

What did you experience?

What did the sermon reveal about how they engage Scripture?

What did it reveal about how they communicate?

What would you want to experience over time rather than conclude from one Sunday?

One sermon is one sermon. Do not make it carry more weight than it can.

21. Informal Moments

Some of the most revealing moments may not have been planned.

An informal moment I remember:

What happened?

Why did it stay with me?

What might it reveal?

What might I be reading into it?

Both questions matter.

22. What Did We Learn That We Did Not Know Before?

If the weekend did not deepen your understanding, ask why.

I learned:

This confirmed something from earlier conversations:

This complicated something I thought I understood:

This changed my understanding:

This raised a new question:

23. What Did the Candidate Learn About Us?

Try to imagine the weekend from the other side.

They probably experienced us as:

They saw our strengths in:

They may have noticed our challenges in:

They may now be wondering:

Is there anything we failed to tell them?

24. Did We Perform?

Ask this carefully.

Were there moments when we were trying to impress the candidate?

Did we show only our strongest ministries?

Did we avoid anything difficult?

Did we allow people to speak honestly?

Did we present hopes as though they were current reality?

Is there anything we need to clarify with the candidate?

Mutual discernment requires the candidate to meet the congregation that actually exists.

25. Hospitality

Think about **FM 8.3 — Hospitality Checklist**.

Did the candidate have enough personal time?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did the weekend feel rushed?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we honor beginning and ending times?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we allow ordinary conversation?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did the candidate have enough opportunity to ask questions?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did anything feel more like surveillance than hospitality?

What should we change next time?

26. Spouse or Family

If family members participated, reflect only on the committee's hospitality.

Do not evaluate the family.

Did we provide what they requested?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did they have sufficient private time?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did we respect their boundaries?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Did anyone inadvertently interview or recruit them?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Is follow-up information needed?

Use **FM 8.6 — Welcoming Spouses and Families**.

27. My Emotional Response

Your emotional response is information, not yet discernment.

I found myself feeling:

☐ Excited
☐ Hopeful
☐ Comfortable
☐ Curious
☐ Energized
☐ Relieved
☐ Anxious
☐ Cautious
☐ Disappointed
☐ Uncertain
☐ Defensive
☐ Other: _____

I think I felt this because:

What part of this response is about the candidate?

What part might be about me?

What part might be about what I hope for this search?

28. Chemistry

It is natural to experience chemistry—or its absence.

Do not pretend otherwise.

My sense of connection with the candidate was:

What contributed to that?

Now ask:

Am I confusing comfort with compatibility for ministry?

Am I confusing familiarity with trust?

Am I confusing difference with incompatibility?

Am I expecting the candidate to resemble a pastor I already admire?

Chemistry deserves attention, but not the final word.

29. Assumptions

Return to **FM 1.5 — Recognizing Our Assumptions**.

An assumption I noticed in myself:

Something the candidate did that challenged one of my assumptions:

Something I may be interpreting through my own preference:

Something I need help from the committee to see more clearly:

30. Comparisons With Other Candidates

Resist ranking candidates too quickly.

Avoid:

Candidate A was warmer.

Candidate B was a stronger preacher.

Candidate C had more experience.

First ask:

What have we learned about this candidate?

This candidate's distinctive gifts appear to include:

Areas we need to understand more fully:

Comparison may eventually be necessary. Understanding comes first.

31. Patterns Across the Search

Think back to:

the candidate's materials

first interview

second interview

references if completed

subsequent conversations

interview weekend

A pattern that has remained consistent:

Another:

Something that appears inconsistent:

A pattern becoming clearer:

Something I still cannot interpret:

Use **FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews**.

32. Candidate and Congregation

Complete these sentences without trying to reach a decision.

I can imagine this candidate helping us:

I can imagine this congregation giving this candidate:

I can imagine tension around:

I can imagine mutual growth around:

Something about this possible partnership that gives me energy:

Something that gives me pause:

33. Do Not Ask Only, "Can They Lead Us?"

Also ask:

Can we be led by this person?

Where might this candidate invite us to grow?

Are we genuinely willing to grow there?

Where might their leadership challenge us?

Would we interpret that challenge as leadership—or as a problem?

Calling a pastor is not simply choosing someone capable of leading; it is choosing to enter a relationship in which leadership will actually occur.

34. What Might We Need to Change?

Mutual discernment asks something of the congregation too.

If this call were to develop, we might need to:

An expectation we may need to reconsider:

A practice we may need to change:

A responsibility we may need to assume rather than give to the pastor:

Do not ask only whether the candidate fits the congregation as it is. Ask what partnership might require from both.

35. Questions That Remain

Do not force uncertainty into a yes or no.

Question 1:

Question 2:

Question 3:

Question 4:

Question 5:

Now identify:

Which can be answered with information?

Which require another conversation?

Which require time?

Which may never have a certain answer?

Not every uncertainty is a warning sign; some are simply the reality of discernment.

36. Questions for the Candidate

If discernment continues, what do you want to ask?

I would like to explore:

A follow-up question might be:

Another:

Use **FM 4.2 — Follow-up Question Guide** rather than creating another full interview.

37. Questions for Ourselves

Some questions raised by the weekend belong to the committee.

We need to clarify:

We need to discuss:

We need to acknowledge:

We need to decide:

Do not ask the candidate to solve questions that belong to the congregation.

38. What Is the Candidate Still Discerning?

Mutual discernment means remembering that the candidate has not simply been waiting for your verdict.

Based on what they said:

The candidate appears to be discerning:

Questions they still have about us:

Information we promised:

Conversation they requested:

Person responsible for follow-up:

39. Before the Committee Meets

Complete these statements privately.

The strongest reason I see for continuing discernment is:

My most significant concern is:

The question I most want the committee to discuss is:

Something I am uncertain about is:

Something I may need others to help me see differently is:

40. Committee Conversation: Begin With Observation

When the committee gathers, do not begin with a vote.

Begin around the circle.

Each person answers:

What did you notice?

No debate, correction, or persuasion.

Record observations:

Only after everyone has spoken move to:

What patterns are we beginning to recognize?

41. Then Name Energy and Concern

Where did we experience energy?

Where did we experience concern?

What observations support those responses?

Where are committee members interpreting the same event differently?

Do not rush to eliminate those differences. Explore them.

42. Separate Concern From Preference

For each concern, ask:

Concern:

Is this about:

☐ Character
☐ Competence
☐ Theology
☐ Leadership
☐ Relationships
☐ Fit for this particular ministry
☐ Something we do not understand
☐ Personal preference
☐ An assumption
☐ Fear of change
☐ Other: _____

Evidence:

What further discernment would help?

43. Look for Convergence

Discernment is not necessarily unanimity of enthusiasm.

Ask:

Where are we seeing similar patterns?

Where are different observations pointing toward the same question?

Where are we genuinely divided?

What is underneath that division?

Do we need more information—or deeper conversation?

44. Pray Before Deciding

Do not use prayer merely to open the meeting and then leave it behind.

After the committee has reflected, stop.

Allow silence.

Then pray.

You might ask:

What are we being invited to recognize?

What are we afraid of?

What are we hoping for?

What are we trying to control?

Where are we experiencing freedom?

What might faithfulness require from us?

Allow silence after the questions.

45. Discernment

Only now ask:

Do we sense that discernment should continue?

☐ Yes

☐ No
☐ Not yet clear

Why?

What patterns support that?

What concerns remain?

What would we need before taking another step?

46. If the Answer Is “Not Yet Clear”

Do not turn uncertainty into a premature no.

Identify what is needed.

☐ Another candidate conversation
☐ Reference conversation
☐ Clarification of theology
☐ Clarification of leadership
☐ Clarification of Terms of Call
☐ Congregational information
☐ Presbytery consultation
☐ More committee conversation
☐ Prayer and time
☐ Other: _____

Next step:

Responsible person:

Date:

47. If the Discernment Is "No"

Use **FM 7.2 — When the Committee Discerns "No"** and the appropriate candidate communication resources.

Before communicating, be able to say:

We are saying no because:

This conclusion is grounded in:

We can communicate this decision respectfully without:

☐ Blaming
☐ Diagnosing
☐ Criticizing personality
☐ Comparing candidates
☐ Offering unnecessary details
☐ Leaving false hope

A faithful no deserves the same care as a faithful yes.

48. If Discernment Continues

Do not immediately begin celebrating a call. Identify the next faithful step.

Next step:

Candidate needs from us:

We need from candidate:

Presbytery/denominational action needed:

Terms of Call action needed:

Person responsible for communication:

Date candidate will hear from us:

49. Final Individual Reflection

Before leaving the meeting, complete privately:

Something I understand more clearly now:

Something I still hold with uncertainty:

Something another committee member helped me see:

Something I need to release:

Something I want to hold in prayer:

50. Closing Prayer

God of call and companionship,

thank you for the people who have entered our lives through this search and for the candidate who has shared this weekend with us.

Help us remember what we have seen and heard without making more of it than it can bear.

Free us from the need to force certainty where there is still mystery.

Give us courage to recognize what is true, humility to question our assumptions, and patience to listen to one another.

Where a path is opening, help us recognize it.

Where a path is closing, give us grace to release it.

And through all our discernment, keep us attentive to the work Christ is already doing among us and in the community we are called to serve.

Amen.

Leader's Note

An interview weekend can produce powerful feelings.

Sometimes the committee is exhilarated.

The candidate preached beautifully. Conversation came easily. People laughed around the dinner table. Someone says on Sunday afternoon:

"I think we've found our pastor."

Perhaps you have.

But wait long enough to discern rather than simply react.

The opposite can happen too.

Something felt awkward. A conversation did not flow. The candidate asked a question that made someone uncomfortable. A sermon did not land as expected. Someone says:

"I just don't think this is the person."

Perhaps they are right.

But again, discern.

The purpose of reflection is not to suppress intuition. Intuition often notices something before we can name it; the task is to become curious about it.

What did I actually observe?

Why did that affect me?

Is this part of a larger pattern?

What other interpretation is possible?

What are others seeing that I am not?

What might we still need to learn?

By this stage of the search, the committee has accumulated much more than a weekend's impressions. You have read the candidate's materials, heard their stories, asked questions, followed those questions deeper, watched patterns emerge, and allowed the candidate to question you.

Now the candidate has entered your place.

They have met your people.

They have seen something of your community.

And you have experienced one another in ways that Zoom could never quite provide.

Do not reduce all of that to whether you liked the weekend. Return to the larger discernment.

What have we been learning about this person?

What have we been learning about ourselves?

What patterns have become clearer?

What remains uncertain?

And finally:

What are we being invited to recognize now?

That is the work before you.

Chapter Nine — Recognizing the Partnership

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 9.1

Twenty-Four Hour Discernment Guide

Purpose

An interview weekend has ended.

The candidate has gone home. The committee is tired. There may be excitement, relief, uncertainty, disappointment—or some combination of all four.

This is precisely when a Search Committee can move too quickly.

A strong weekend can create momentum:

"This is our candidate."

An uncomfortable moment can create the opposite:

"Something just didn't feel right."

Neither response should be ignored or allowed to become a decision before the committee has had time to understand it.

The first twenty-four hours are not primarily for deciding, but for allowing the experience to settle.

Do not rush from experience to conclusion. Make room for discernment.

Use this guide after completing **FM 8.8 — Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheet** and before the committee makes a final decision about whether to move forward.

---

1. Why Twenty-Four Hours?

Twenty-four hours is not a magic number. It is a discipline.

It creates enough space for the committee to move beyond the emotional intensity of the weekend without allowing the search to drift unnecessarily.

During this period:

- **rest**
- **reflect**
- **pray**
- **notice**
- **resist campaigning**
- **allow questions to emerge**

The purpose is not to stop thinking about the candidate, but to stop trying to settle the question too quickly.

---

2. Before Everyone Leaves

Before committee members separate, confirm:

☐ Everyone knows the discernment timeline

☐ Everyone has **FM 8.8 — Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheet**

☐ Everyone understands that no decision will be made immediately

☐ Committee members know when they will reconvene

☐ Candidate knows when to expect communication

☐ Someone is responsible for any immediate practical follow-up

☐ Reimbursement or travel matters are handled separately from discernment

Committee will reconvene:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place/Zoom: _____

Candidate will hear from us by:

Person responsible:

---

3. Agree Not to Campaign

During these twenty-four hours, committee members should not begin building support for their conclusion.

Avoid:

"Wasn't she wonderful?"

"Did you notice that thing he said?"

"I think we've found our pastor."

"I don't think this is going to work."

"Surely everyone else saw what I saw."

Those conversations begin forming a decision before everyone has reflected independently.

Our agreement:

We will reflect before we persuade.

☐ Agreed

---

4. Protect Confidentiality

The interview weekend may have generated excitement.

That does not change confidentiality.

During the next twenty-four hours:

☐ Do not discuss the candidate with spouses or partners unless permitted by your process

☐ Do not discuss the candidate with congregation members

☐ Do not post anything on social media

☐ Do not contact people who met the candidate for informal opinions unless they were designated to provide feedback

☐ Do not contact the candidate independently

☐ Do not contact the candidate's references independently

☐ Follow established Search Committee confidentiality practices

Excitement is not permission to widen the circle.

---

5. First: Rest

You have spent a weekend concentrating intensely.

Do not underestimate fatigue.

Before interpreting the weekend:

☐ Eat

☐ Sleep

☐ Return to ordinary life

☐ Allow some silence

☐ Do something unrelated to the search

A tired mind can mistake intensity for clarity.

---

6. Resist the Immediate Scorecard

Do not begin with:

Preaching: 8/10

Personality: 9/10

Leadership: 7/10

Community fit: 8/10

A pastoral call is not the sum of category scores.

Instead ask:

What did I experience?

What did I notice?

What is becoming clearer?

What remains unresolved?

Return to **FM 8.8 — Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheet**.

---

7. First Reflection: What Remains With Me?

Several hours after the weekend, without consulting anyone else, write:

The moment I keep remembering:

A conversation I keep returning to:

Something the candidate said that stayed with me:

Something I noticed that I did not expect:

Do not interpret yet. Simply remember.

8. What Has Faded?

Something that felt extremely important during the weekend may already feel less significant.

Something that seemed important at the time:

It now feels:

☐ More important

☐ Less important

☐ About the same

☐ I am not sure

Why?

Time sometimes changes the weight we give an experience. Notice that.

9. What Has Become More Important?

The opposite may happen.

A small moment may continue returning to your attention.

Something that has grown in significance:

Why do I think it matters?

Is it connected to a larger pattern?

If yes, what pattern?

10. Observation Before Interpretation

Choose one significant moment from the weekend.

What actually happened?

What did I observe?

What did I feel?

What did I conclude?

Now ask:

Is my conclusion the only reasonable interpretation?

Another possible interpretation:

This does not mean your first interpretation was wrong. It means you have examined it.

---

11. Notice Your Emotional Temperature

Several hours after the visit, I feel:

☐ Excited

☐ Hopeful

☐ Peaceful

☐ Energized

☐ Relieved

☐ Curious

☐ Cautious

☐ Anxious

☐ Disappointed

☐ Unsettled

☐ Confused

☐ Other: _____

The strongest feeling is:

I think it comes from:

What might this feeling be telling me?

What might it be telling me about myself rather than the candidate?

Emotions are part of discernment, but they are not self-interpreting.

12. Notice Relief

Relief deserves particular attention.

Perhaps you are thinking:

"Finally. We can be done searching."

Ask:

Am I relieved because this candidate appears genuinely promising?

Or because I am tired of the search?

Would I feel the same urgency if we were beginning the search today?

Search fatigue can make a candidate look like an ending. You are discerning a beginning.

13. Notice Excitement

Excitement is good. Become curious about it.

I am excited because:

What specifically generated that excitement?

Is it connected to qualities we identified as important earlier in the search?

Or to something unexpected?

Does the excitement persist when I consider the whole candidate rather than the best moments of the weekend?

14. Notice Discomfort

Do not dismiss discomfort or automatically trust it.

Something made me uncomfortable:

What actually happened?

Was the discomfort connected to:

☐ Character

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership

☐ Behavior

☐ A significant inconsistency

☐ A difference from my expectations

☐ A difference from my preferences

☐ A challenge to the congregation

☐ A challenge to me

☐ Something I cannot yet name

What do I need to understand before interpreting it?

---

15. Notice Familiarity

Sometimes a candidate feels immediately familiar.

That can be comforting.

Ask:

Who does this candidate remind me of?

A former pastor?

A friend?

A respected leader?

Myself?

Someone difficult from my past?

Familiarity can influence judgment in either direction. Recognize it.

---

16. Return to the Search

Before deciding what you think about the candidate, return to what the congregation said it was seeking.

The ministry before us is:

The leadership we believe it requires is:

The gifts we identified as especially important are:

The challenges the next pastor will encounter include:

Now ask:

What did this weekend help me understand about this candidate in relation to that ministry?

---

17. Return to the Whole Candidate

Do not allow the weekend to replace everything you learned before it.

Remember:

- **written materials**
- **first conversations**
- **story questions**
- **follow-up questions**
- **scenarios**
- **theological conversations**
- **references if completed**
- **previous committee reflections**
- **the interview weekend**

Something the weekend confirmed:

Something it deepened:

Something it complicated:

Something that seems inconsistent:

Discern patterns across the whole process.

18. What Is Becoming Clearer?

Complete:

I am becoming clearer about:

A pattern I now recognize:

Something I understand about the candidate that I did not understand before the weekend:

Something I understand about our congregation that I did not understand before:

19. What Is Still Unclear?

I still do not understand:

I still wonder:

I would like one more conversation about:

I need more information about:

Uncertainty does not automatically mean no. Name what remains uncertain.

20. Is the Question Answerable?

For each significant uncertainty, ask:

Question:

Can it be addressed through:

☐ Information

☐ A follow-up question

☐ References

☐ Presbytery consultation

☐ Terms of Call conversation

☐ Another candidate conversation

☐ Committee reflection

☐ Prayer and time

☐ It cannot be known in advance

Next step if needed:

Not every uncertainty requires another interview; some uncertainty belongs to every call.

---

21. What Did the Candidate See in Us?

The candidate has been discerning too.

Think about what they experienced.

They saw us when:

They heard us talk about:

They encountered our strengths in:

They encountered our challenges in:

They may now be wondering:

Do not imagine that only the committee is deciding whether to continue.

22. Did We Tell the Truth?

Ask:

Did we present the congregation as it actually is?

Did we soften anything important?

Did we exaggerate our readiness for change?

Did we present aspirations as current reality?

Did we avoid a difficult subject?

Is there anything the candidate needs to know before discernment goes further?

If yes, name it now.

Do not wait until after a call.

---

23. What Might This Candidate Ask of Us?

Imagine the candidate becomes pastor.

Not:

What will they do for us?

Ask:

What might ministry with this person require from us?

We might need to:

We might be challenged to:

We might need to relinquish:

We might need to learn:

We might need to take responsibility for:

A call asks something of both pastor and congregation.

24. Am I Willing?

This question is different from:

Do I like the candidate?

Ask:

Am I willing to be pastored by this person?

Am I willing to listen when they challenge something I value?

Am I willing to let them become our pastor rather than the pastor I have imagined?

Am I willing to give them room to learn us?

Am I willing to learn them?

These questions move discernment from preference toward relationship.

25. Pray Without Asking for an Answer

Prayer during discernment can become another attempt to produce certainty.

Instead of:

"God, tell me whether this is the person."

try:

"God, help me attend."

Sit quietly.

Then ask:

What am I noticing?

What am I resisting?

What am I hoping?

What am I afraid of?

What am I trying to control?

What might I need to release?

Remain quiet for a few minutes.

You do not need to manufacture an answer.

---

26. Scripture for the Twenty-Four Hours

Choose a brief passage and stay with it rather than searching for a verse that gives an answer.

Possible passages:

1 Samuel 3:1–10
“Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Luke 24:13–35
Recognition comes while walking together.

Acts 10:9–23
Peter's assumptions are disrupted before he understands what God is doing.

Acts 16:6–10
Some paths close before another becomes visible.

1 Corinthians 12:4–7
Different gifts are given for the common good.

Philippians 1:9–10
Love grows in knowledge and discernment.

Passage:

Word or phrase that stays with me:

What does it invite me to notice?

---

27. Overnight

Before sleeping, write one sentence.

The question I want to carry overnight is:

Then stop working on the search. Do not solve it in bed.

---

28. The Next Morning

Before checking email or contacting another committee member, return briefly to your notes.

What feels different this morning?

What feels the same?

What has become clearer?

What has become less important?

What question remains strongest?

29. Look Again at Your Concern

If you identified a significant concern yesterday:

Concern:

This morning it feels:

☐ Stronger

☐ Weaker

☐ About the same

☐ Different

Why?

What evidence supports it?

What would help us discern it responsibly?

30. Look Again at Your Hope

My strongest hope about this candidate is:

What supports that hope?

Am I asking the candidate to fulfill a hope no pastor could reasonably fulfill?

Am I imagining possibilities the candidate has actually demonstrated?

Hope should be grounded.

---

31. Look for Freedom

Discernment sometimes becomes clearer not through certainty but through freedom.

Ask:

Do I feel free to imagine a yes?

Do I feel free to imagine a no?

Am I afraid of disappointing the candidate?

Am I afraid of disappointing the congregation?

Am I afraid of beginning the search again?

Am I trying to make the search end?

Can I remain open to either outcome?

Freedom matters.

---

32. Prepare for the Committee Conversation

Before the committee meets, be prepared to share five things.

1. Something I observed

2. A pattern I recognize

3. Something that gives me energy

4. Something that gives me pause

5. A question I believe we still need to explore

This is more useful than arriving with “I'm a yes” or “I'm a no.”

33. What Not to Bring Into the Meeting

Try not to arrive with:

☐ A campaign

☐ A speech

☐ A candidate ranking

☐ A list of people who agree with you

☐ A demand for immediate consensus

☐ A prediction about how the congregation will react

☐ A desire to win

Bring observations, questions, and your judgment—and enough humility to allow that judgment to deepen.

---

34. Beginning the Committee Meeting

Do not begin:

"Okay, who wants to vote?"

Begin with silence.

Then perhaps pray:

God, give us freedom from the need to force an answer. Help us listen to what we have experienced, to one another, and to your Spirit among us. Give us courage to recognize what is true and grace to release what is not ours to control. Amen.

Then go around the circle.

Each person answers only:

What has stayed with you since the candidate left?

Do not respond to one another yet. Listen.

---

35. Listen for Convergence

After everyone has spoken, ask:

What are several of us noticing?

What patterns appear across different experiences?

Where do we hear similar energy?

Where do we hear similar concern?

Convergence does not require identical language. Listen beneath the words.

36. Listen for Difference

Then ask:

Where are we seeing things differently?

Are we interpreting the same event differently?

Are we weighting different things differently?

Is someone seeing something the rest of us missed?

What might we learn from that difference?

Do not rush to vote away minority observations; they may contain important information.

37. Distinguish Three Kinds of Concern

When concerns arise, ask which kind they are.

1. A concern that requires clarification

We do not know enough.

2. A concern that reflects difference

The candidate is not what someone expected or preferred.

3. A concern that may indicate a significant problem

Something about character, integrity, leadership, theology, boundaries, or capacity may require serious attention.

Our concern:

We believe it is primarily:

☐ Clarification

☐ Difference

☐ Potential significant concern

☐ We are not sure

What should we do with it?

---

38. Do We Need Another Question—or Are We Avoiding a Decision?

Search Committees can keep interviewing because certainty feels safer than deciding.

Ask:

Would another conversation provide information we genuinely need?

or:

Are we hoping another conversation will remove the uncertainty inherent in every call?

We still need to know:

Can that reasonably be known before a call?

If not, recognize the limit.

39. Discern the Next Step

After listening and prayer, ask:

What is the next faithful step?

Not:

Can we guarantee this will work?

Possible next steps:

☐ Continue discernment with candidate

☐ Ask one or two focused follow-up questions

☐ Complete or revisit references

☐ Clarify Terms of Call

☐ Consult presbytery

☐ Address a congregational issue before proceeding

☐ Allow additional time

☐ Discern no

☐ Move toward the next stage of call

☐ Other: _____

Our next step:

40. If There Is Strong Agreement

Strong agreement is valuable.

Do not manufacture additional doubt simply because discernment seems clear.

Ask:

What are we recognizing together?

What evidence and patterns support it?

Have significant concerns been heard?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we ready for the next step?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, proceed.

Discernment does not require prolonged anxiety.

---

41. If There Is Significant Disagreement

Do not immediately count votes.

Ask each person:

What are you seeing that you most need the rest of us to understand?

Record without debate.

Then ask:

What would help us understand this difference more clearly?

The goal is not unanimity at any cost, but faithful discernment.

---

42. If Someone Says, “I Just Have a Feeling”

Do not dismiss it.

Ask:

“Can you help us become curious about that feeling?”

Possible follow-ups:

When did you first notice it?

Was there a particular moment connected with it?

Does it remind you of anything?

What concern might the feeling be pointing toward?

What observation might help us understand it?

Sometimes intuition identifies a pattern before language catches up; sometimes it reflects an assumption. Explore it.

---

43. If Someone Says, "I Just Know"

Respond with curiosity.

"What has led you there?"

Discernment should be able to tell its story. A committee does not need courtroom evidence, but it does need more than certainty asserted loudly.

---

44. The Twenty-Four Hour Question

At the end of this period, each committee member should be able to answer:

What do I recognize now that I could not recognize clearly when the candidate first left?

That is the purpose of the twenty-four hours.

---

45. Record the Committee's Discernment

We recognize:

We remain uncertain about:

We need to explore:

Our next step is:

Person responsible:

Date:

Candidate will hear from us:

46. Communicate Promptly

The twenty-four-hour discipline is not permission to leave the candidate waiting indefinitely.

If you promised contact, make contact.

Even if the committee needs additional time, say so.

For example:

"Thank you again for the time you spent with us. Our committee has met and our discernment is continuing. We have identified a few things we want to explore more carefully together. We expect to be able to speak with you again by _____."

Then keep that commitment.

---

47. Do Not Ask the Candidate to Wait While You Quietly Explore Someone Else

If the committee's discernment has moved away from the candidate, be honest.

Do not keep a candidate warm simply because you are afraid another possibility may not work out.

People are not backup plans.

Use the resources in **Section 7 — When Discernment Leads Elsewhere** when appropriate.

---

48. Closing Prayer

God who calls and sends,

we have listened, questioned, watched, hoped, and wondered.

We have encountered another person seeking to discern your call, even as we seek to discern ours.

Free us from our need for certainty.

Free us from our fear of beginning again.

Free us from the desire simply to finish.

Help us recognize what has become clear.

Give us patience with what remains unclear.

Give us courage when the faithful path asks us to continue, and grace when the faithful path asks us to release.

Keep candidate and congregation attentive to the work Christ is already doing, trusting that neither our hope nor our future rests upon our ability to control the outcome.

Amen.

Leader's Note

Twenty-four hours can seem unnecessary.

After months of profiles, interviews, conversations, reference checks, prayer, and planning, the committee may feel ready.

Sometimes it is.

But an interview weekend is different from everything that came before it.

The candidate is no longer a face on a screen.

They have walked through your building.

They have eaten at your tables.

They have met your people.

They have seen your community.

You have watched them encounter a place they may someday be called to love.

That experience has emotional weight.

Give it room.

The purpose of twenty-four hours is not to make discernment slower, but deeper.

Sleep.

Pray.

Notice what remains.

Notice what fades.

Become curious about excitement and discomfort.

Return to the patterns you have been recognizing throughout the search.

When the committee gathers again, do not begin by asking everyone to declare a position.

Begin with:

What has stayed with you?

Listen until the patterns become clearer.

Then ask the question that has guided this entire process:

What are we being invited to recognize now?

FM 9.2

Observation Before Opinions

Worksheet

Purpose

Search Committees need opinions.

Eventually you must make judgments, reach conclusions, and decide whether discernment with a candidate should continue.

The problem is not having opinions, but forming them too quickly.

After an interview or candidate weekend, committee conversation can move almost immediately toward:

"I really liked her."

"He didn't seem very pastoral."

"She would fit us well."

"I don't think he is a strong leader."

Those may prove to be thoughtful judgments. First ask:

What did you observe that led you there?

This worksheet creates a simple discipline:

Observation → Curiosity → Interpretation → Pattern → Discernment

Use it individually before committee discussion and together whenever an opinion begins carrying more weight than the observations supporting it.

---

1. The Basic Discipline

Before saying:

"I think..."

try beginning with:

"I noticed..."

An observation describes something you actually encountered.

An opinion tells what you think it means.

Observation

"When we asked about a difficult staff relationship, the candidate described what the other person might have been experiencing before describing their own response."

Opinion

"I think the candidate is emotionally mature."

The opinion may be reasonable, but the observation allows the committee to examine it together.

---

2. Practice: Observation or Opinion?

Mark each statement.

“The candidate asked three follow-up questions about our community partnerships.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“She is really mission-minded.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“When asked about conflict, he told a story about a disagreement with the session.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“He doesn't handle conflict well.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“She paused for several seconds before answering the theological question.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“She wasn't confident in her theology.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“He remembered the name of the community partner we met earlier.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

“He really cares about people.”

☐ Observation
☐ Opinion

The second statement in each pair may be worth considering. The first gives you something to examine.

---

3. What Did I Notice?

Before discussing the candidate with anyone else, record several observations.

Observation 1

I noticed:

Observation 2

I noticed:

Observation 3

I noticed:

Observation 4

I noticed:

Observation 5

I noticed:

Do not explain them yet. Just record what happened.

4. What Did I Hear?

Record specific things the candidate said.

Do not rely only on whether you liked the answer.

Something the candidate said that stayed with me:

A story I remember:

A phrase or idea I noticed more than once:

A question the candidate asked:

Something the candidate did not answer directly:

5. What Did I See?

Think about behavior as well as words.

During conversation, I noticed:

While listening to someone else:

During an informal moment:

With staff:

With congregational members:

In the community:

6. Now Name Your Opinion

Choose one opinion you formed.

My opinion is:

Do not apologize for having it. Now examine it.

7. What Led Me There?

Observations supporting my opinion:

-

- _____
  - _____

Did someone else's comment influence my opinion?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

_____

_____

Did I hold this opinion before the weekend?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, what had already shaped it?

_____

_____

_____

8. Separate Observation From Interpretation

Take one observation.

What happened:

_____

_____

My interpretation:

_____

_____

Another reasonable interpretation might be:

What additional information would help?

The purpose is not to talk yourself out of your interpretation, but to know the difference.

9. “They Seemed…”

Be particularly careful with sentences beginning:

“They seemed…”

The candidate seemed:

☐ Warm

☐ Cold

☐ Confident

☐ Arrogant

☐ Humble

☐ Nervous

☐ Pastoral

☐ Distant

☐ Curious

☐ Defensive

☐ Energetic

☐ Tired

☐ Engaging

☐ Reserved

☐ Other: _____

Now choose one.

They seemed:

_____

What did I observe that created that impression?

_____

_____

Could another person reasonably interpret that behavior differently?

_____

_____

_____

10. Adjectives Need Evidence

If you find yourself describing the candidate with an adjective, pause.

Adjective:

_____

Examples:

strong

warm

rigid

creative

controlling

pastoral

visionary

defensive

collaborative

inexperienced

wise

Now ask:

What did the candidate actually do or say that led me to use this word?

Is this based on:

☐ One moment

☐ Several moments

☐ A pattern across interviews

☐ Something a reference said

☐ My intuition

☐ My preference

☐ Something I cannot yet identify

That distinction matters.

---

11. “Good Fit”

This phrase deserves special attention.

I think the candidate is:

☐ A good fit

☐ Not a good fit

☐ I am uncertain

Now ask:

Fit with what?

☐ Our theology

☐ Our current culture

☐ Our mission

☐ Our leadership needs

☐ Our hopes for the future

☐ Our current expectations

☐ Our preferred personality

☐ The previous pastor

☐ Me

☐ Other: _____

What observations support my sense of fit?

Could “not fitting” some part of our current culture actually be important for our future?

Do not use fit as a substitute for discernment.

12. “I Liked Them”

Liking a candidate is not a problem.

Ask what created the response.

I particularly liked:

What did I experience?

Did the candidate remind me of someone?

Did they affirm something important to me?

Did I feel understood by them?

Did they share my interests or perspectives?

Is what I liked important to the ministry we are discerning?

Sometimes it is; sometimes it is simply pleasant. Know the difference.

13. “I Didn't Like…”

The same discipline applies to negative reactions.

Something I disliked:

What happened?

What meaning did I give it?

Is that meaning supported by other observations?

Could this be a difference in:

☐ Personality

☐ Communication style

☐ Generation

☐ Culture

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership style

☐ Preference

☐ Expectation

☐ Other: _____

Does this difference matter for ministry?

14. Comfort Is Not the Same as Call

Complete:

I felt most comfortable when:

I felt least comfortable when:

Now ask:

Was my discomfort caused by something unhealthy—or because the candidate challenged something familiar?

A candidate who makes everyone comfortable is not necessarily the candidate the congregation needs; neither is one who makes everyone uncomfortable. Become curious about the response.

15. One Moment or a Pattern?

Observation:

Have I noticed something similar:

☐ In written materials

☐ First interview

☐ Second interview

☐ Scenario questions

☐ Theological conversation

☐ Informal conversation

☐ Community tour

☐ Staff interaction

☐ References

☐ Interview weekend

☐ Nowhere else

Pattern I may be seeing:

One moment invites curiosity; repeated observations may reveal a pattern.

16. Positive Patterns Matter Too

Committees sometimes examine concerns more carefully than enthusiasm. Apply the same standard to both.

Something positive I noticed:

Where else have I seen it?

Does it appear to be a pattern?

Why might it matter for this ministry?

Do not scrutinize concerns while leaving enthusiasm unexamined.

17. A Concern

My concern is:

What did I actually observe?

How many times?

In what settings?

Is there information that contradicts my concern?

What question might help us understand it better?

18. A Hope

My hope is:

What observations support that hope?

Am I projecting something onto the candidate?

Am I imagining a gift they have actually demonstrated?

Am I hoping this candidate will solve something that belongs to the congregation?

Hope deserves evidence too.

19. What Did the Candidate Actually Say?

When committee members disagree about an answer, return as closely as possible to what was said.

Question:

Candidate's response as I remember it:

What I heard in that response:

What another committee member may have heard:

Then ask:

Are we disagreeing about what the candidate said—or about what we think it means?

That distinction can clarify many committee disagreements.

---

20. What Did I Expect?

Expectations influence observation.

Before the weekend, I expected the candidate to:

That expectation came from:

☐ Previous interviews

☐ Written materials

☐ References

☐ Candidate's experience

☐ My hopes

☐ My assumptions

☐ Comparison with another candidate

☐ Comparison with a former pastor

☐ Other: _____

What happened instead?

Was the difference significant?

Or simply unexpected?

Unexpected and problematic are not synonyms.

---

21. What Am I Comparing?

I notice myself comparing this candidate with:

☐ Previous pastor

☐ Favorite former pastor

☐ Another candidate

☐ A pastor I know

☐ Myself

☐ An imagined ideal pastor

☐ Other: _____

The comparison is:

Is that comparison helping discernment?

Or distorting it?

---

22. What Am I Assuming?

Return to **FM 1.5 — Recognizing Our Assumptions**.

I may be assuming:

What evidence supports that assumption?

What evidence challenges it?

What could I ask rather than assume?

23. What Am I Filling In?

We naturally fill gaps in stories.

For example:

"They didn't mention evangelism, so it must not matter to them."

"She has served a large church, so she probably delegates well."

"He is quiet, so he may not be able to lead strong personalities."

Something I may be filling in:

What do I actually know?

What would I need to ask?

Do not turn missing information into invented information.

---

24. What Did I Want to Hear?

I hoped the candidate would say:

Did they?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Partly

If not, how did that affect my reaction?

Was my hoped-for answer actually important?

Why?

Sometimes disappointment reveals more about our expectations than about the candidate.

---

25. Behavior or Personality?

Avoid turning behavior into personality labels.

Instead of:

"She is controlling."

try:

"During three conversations, she redirected questions back to her preferred topic."

Instead of:

"He is passive."

try:

"When asked how he handled the disagreement, he described waiting for others to initiate the conversation."

Personality judgment I am tempted to make:

Behavior I actually observed:

Is there a pattern?

26. Intuition

Intuition matters.

Sometimes we notice something before we understand it.

My intuition is telling me:

Instead of stopping there, ask:

When did I first feel this?

What was happening?

What other moments reinforced it?

What might my intuition be noticing?

What might it be importing from my own experience?

Honor intuition by investigating it.

27. What Would Change My Mind?

This is a useful question in discernment.

My current interpretation:

Evidence that would strengthen it:

Evidence that would weaken it:

Is there anything I could learn that would change my mind?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, ask yourself:

Have I moved from discernment to a fixed position?

---

28. What Are Others Seeing?

Before defending your interpretation, ask another committee member:

"What did you notice?"

Record something another person observed that you did not.

Does it:

☐ Reinforce my interpretation

☐ Complicate my interpretation

☐ Challenge my interpretation

☐ Add something entirely new

What am I seeing differently now?

Discernment becomes communal when others' observations can change us.

---

29. When Two People Saw the Same Moment Differently

What happened?

Person A interpreted it as:

Person B interpreted it as:

Now return together to:

What did we actually observe?

What assumptions may be shaping each interpretation?

What question remains?

Different interpretations need not be settled immediately; sometimes they identify exactly where deeper discernment is needed.

30. The Committee Observation Round

Before discussing whether discernment should continue, go around the table.

Each person completes only this sentence:

"Something I noticed was..."

No responses, arguments, or conclusions.

Observations:

When everyone has spoken, ask:

What patterns do we hear?

31. Pattern Map

Pattern 1

We repeatedly observed:

It may suggest:

We still need to understand:

Pattern 2

We repeatedly observed:

It may suggest:

We still need to understand:

Pattern 3

We repeatedly observed:

It may suggest:

We still need to understand:

32. Strong Opinions With Little Evidence

During discussion, listen for strong claims.

Statement:

Evidence offered:

Is the evidence sufficient to treat this as a pattern?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unclear

What might we need?

The stronger the conclusion, the more carefully the committee should examine what supports it.

33. Small Observations With Large Significance

The reverse can also occur.

Something may seem small but matter greatly.

Observation:

Why might it matter?

Is it connected with:

☐ Integrity

☐ Boundaries

☐ Character

☐ Treatment of others

☐ Power

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership

☐ Other: _____

What further exploration is appropriate?

Do not dismiss an observation merely because it happened once when what happened is significant.

34. From Observation to Question

Use observations to create better follow-up questions.

Observation:

Instead of concluding:

Ask:

Observation:

Instead of concluding:

Ask:

Curiosity is often the bridge from observation to discernment.

35. From Observation to Pattern

We noticed:

We also noticed:

Earlier in the search we heard:

A reference said:

Together these may suggest:

Confidence in this pattern:

☐ Strong

☐ Emerging

☐ Uncertain

Further exploration needed:

36. From Pattern to Discernment

Only after identifying patterns, ask:

What might this pattern mean for the ministry before us?

Does it point toward:

☐ A significant gift

☐ A possible challenge

☐ An important difference

☐ A growth area

☐ A concern requiring clarification

☐ A concern requiring serious attention

☐ Something that may not matter

☐ Other: _____

Why?

37. What Are We Learning About Ourselves?

The candidate is not the only subject of observation.

During this process, I noticed our committee:

We became especially animated when:

We became uncomfortable when:

We avoided:

We seemed to assume:

What might that tell us about the congregation?

38. The Congregation Is Being Discerned Too

Ask:

What did our questions reveal about us?

What did our hospitality reveal?

What did our reactions reveal?

What did our disagreements reveal?

What might we need to address regardless of which candidate is called?

This work is never only about choosing a pastor.

39. Before Offering an Opinion

Use this brief check.

I am about to say:

Before saying it, can I answer:

What did I observe?

Is this one event or a pattern?

What interpretation am I giving it?

What assumptions might be involved?

What other interpretation is possible?

What question remains?

Now offer your judgment.

---

40. Committee Language

Encourage committee members to use language such as:

"I noticed..."

"I heard..."

"I found myself wondering..."

"I interpreted that as..."

"I may be making an assumption here..."

"I think I am seeing a pattern..."

"Does anyone remember that differently?"

"What else might that mean?"

"Where else have we seen this?"

"What would help us understand this better?"

This is not timid language; it is disciplined language.

---

41. Language to Interrupt Gently

When someone says:

"She's obviously..."

ask:

"What did you observe that led you there?"

When someone says:

"Everybody could see..."

ask:

"Let's hear what each person noticed."

When someone says:

"He's just not..."

ask:

"What happened that gave you that impression?"

When someone says:

"I know this kind of person."

ask:

"What are we learning about this particular person?"

When someone says:

"It's just a feeling."

ask:

"What might the feeling be helping us notice?"

The goal is not to silence judgment, but to deepen it.

---

42. My Current Discernment

After working through observation and interpretation:

What I currently recognize:

Patterns that support this:

Something that gives me energy:

Something that gives me pause:

Something I still need to understand:

My current sense of the next faithful step:

---

43. Final Question

Before the committee moves toward a decision, ask:

Have we actually encountered this candidate—or have we created a candidate from our impressions of them?

Then ask:

What do the patterns of what we have actually seen and heard invite us to recognize?

Leader's Note

Search Committees cannot avoid interpretation.

Nor should they.

Discernment requires judgment. The discipline is to keep our judgments connected to what we have actually encountered.

"She is warm."

"He is rigid."

"She is a visionary."

"He isn't pastoral."

"She isn't a good fit."

Those statements sound as though they describe the candidate. Often they describe the candidate as interpreted by us. That distinction matters.

A committee member may be absolutely right that something is wrong before they can explain why. Another may recognize an extraordinary gift in a moment everyone else overlooked. Intuition matters.

So do feelings and impressions. Become curious about them.

Ask what happened.

Ask what you noticed.

Ask whether you have seen it elsewhere.

Ask what assumptions you brought with you.

Ask what another person saw.

Ask whether a single observation is becoming a pattern.

Then make judgments.

The goal is not objectivity; no Search Committee stands outside its own history, hopes, fears, preferences, and experiences.

The goal is something more realistic and more faithful:

To know when we are observing, when we are interpreting, and when repeated observations have become a pattern worthy of discernment.

That discipline will not make every decision easy. It will make the conversation more trustworthy.

FM 9.3

Looking for Patterns Across the Search

Purpose

By this point, the committee knows a great deal about the candidate.

You have read materials.

You have heard stories.

You have asked follow-up questions.

You have explored scenarios.

You have talked about theology, leadership, ministry, community, and the wider church.

You may have spoken with references.

You have spent extended time together during an interview weekend.

The danger is allowing the most recent experience—or the strongest personality in the committee—to outweigh everything that came before.

Discernment asks a different question:

What have we been consistently learning about this candidate across the whole search?

A pattern is more than something you liked or disliked. It appears repeatedly, in different settings and through different kinds of evidence.

This guide helps the committee bring the whole search back into view.

Do not ask which moment mattered most. Ask what the moments are saying together.

Use this resource with **FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews**, **FM 8.8 — Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheet**, **FM 9.1 — Twenty-Four Hour Discernment Guide**, and **FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions**.

---

1. Gather the Whole Search

Before meeting, gather the material the committee has accumulated.

☐ Candidate résumé/PDP/PIF or equivalent

☐ Candidate statement of faith

☐ Other written materials

☐ First Reading Worksheet

☐ Reading for Patterns Worksheet

☐ Candidate Conversation Notes

☐ First Interview Reflection Worksheets

☐ Second Interview notes

☐ Scenario responses

☐ Theology conversations

☐ Reference notes, if completed

☐ Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheets

☐ Other: _____

Do not rely on memory alone. Look across the whole search.

---

2. Reconstruct the Journey

Create a simple chronology.

Written materials

What first caught our attention?

Initial conversations

What began to emerge?

First interview

What did we notice?

Later interviews

What became clearer?

References

What was reinforced or complicated?

Interview weekend

What did we experience?

Now ask:

What has remained consistent through all of these stages?

---

3. Begin With Observations

Before naming patterns, return to **FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions**.

A pattern should be grounded in observations.

Not:

"She is collaborative."

But perhaps:

"In three different stories, she described involving others before making significant decisions."

Not:

"He doesn't deal well with conflict."

But perhaps:

"In two interview answers and one scenario, he described delaying difficult conversations until the issue became urgent."

Observation:

Observation:

Observation:

Possible pattern:

---

4. What Counts as a Pattern?

A pattern may appear through:

- **several stories**
- **different interviews**
- **candidate questions**
- **behavior during the weekend**
- **responses to scenarios**
- **references**
- **written materials**
- **informal interactions**

A pattern becomes more significant when it appears repeatedly and in different contexts.

Ask:

Have we seen this more than once?

and:

Have we seen it in more than one kind of setting?

---

5. Pattern or Repetition?

A candidate may tell the same story more than once. That is repetition; a pattern is deeper.

For example, the candidate may tell three different stories in which they:

- **became curious before acting**
- **brought people together**
- **listened for what others were seeing**
- **allowed an approach to emerge collaboratively**

The stories are different; the leadership pattern is similar.

Stories or observations:

_____

_____

What seems consistent beneath them?

That is where patterns emerge.

6. Look for Patterns in Stories

Return to the stories the candidate told.

Stories we remember:

_____

_____

_____

Ask:

What role does the candidate usually play in their stories?

☐ Initiator

☐ Listener

☐ Organizer

☐ Teacher

☐ Problem solver

☐ Collaborator

☐ Advocate

☐ Mediator

☐ Vision caster

☐ Caregiver

☐ Other: _____

What do they tend to notice first?

_____

_____

What do they tend to do next?

_____

_____

Who else appears in their stories?

_____

_____

What pattern might this reveal?

_____

_____

_____

7. Look for Patterns in What the Candidate Notices

Across the search, what seems to attract the candidate's attention?

☐ People

☐ Relationships

☐ Systems

☐ Theology

☐ Worship

☐ Community

☐ Mission

☐ Organization

☐ Conflict/differences

☐ Possibilities

☐ Problems

☐ Resources

☐ People who are overlooked

☐ Other: _____

Examples:

_____

_____

Pattern:

What someone repeatedly notices can reveal how they encounter ministry.

8. Look for Patterns in Curiosity

What does the candidate consistently want to understand?

Questions they have asked repeatedly:

_____

_____

Subjects they returned to:

_____

People they wanted to hear from:

Things they noticed during the community tour:

What might their curiosity reveal?

Curiosity can reveal vocation before a candidate names it directly.

9. Look for Patterns in Listening

Across interviews and the weekend:

We observed the candidate:

☐ Asking follow-up questions

☐ Remembering earlier conversations

☐ Seeking clarification

☐ Making room for other perspectives

☐ Listening for emotion

☐ Becoming curious about differences

☐ Moving quickly toward their own answer

☐ Redirecting conversation

☐ Other: _____

Examples:

Pattern:

10. Look for Patterns in Leadership

Do not begin with:

"What leadership style does the candidate have?"

Begin with stories and behavior.

When leadership was needed, the candidate tended to:

When others had expertise, the candidate tended to:

When a decision was difficult:

When resistance emerged:

When something failed:

Pattern we recognize:

11. Look for Patterns Around Power

How does the candidate appear to understand and use authority?

We observed:

In stories about staff:

In stories about governing boards:

In stories about congregational disagreement:

In informal interactions:

Pattern:

Questions of power often become visible indirectly. Pay attention.

12. Look for Patterns in Collaboration

The candidate tends to describe ministry using:

☐ I

☐ We

☐ Both

That alone proves nothing. Look deeper.

Who participates in decisions in their stories?

How are other people's gifts described?

What happens when someone disagrees?

How does the candidate describe success?

Pattern:

---

13. Look for Patterns in Conflict and Difference

Review answers to questions and scenarios involving disagreement.

Candidate tends to:

☐ Engage directly

☐ Seek understanding

☐ Avoid

☐ Mediate

☐ Persuade

☐ Seek consensus

☐ Clarify roles and authority

☐ Slow the process

☐ Move quickly toward resolution

☐ Other: _____

Evidence:

_____

_____

Has this appeared in more than one context?

_____

Pattern:

_____

_____

_____

14. Look for Patterns in Failure

The way candidates tell stories about failure can be particularly revealing.

When something failed, the candidate tended to:

☐ Blame circumstances

☐ Blame others

☐ Take excessive responsibility

☐ Name their own responsibility

☐ Describe what they learned

☐ Describe what changed afterward

☐ Minimize the failure

☐ Laugh at themselves

☐ Other: _____

Examples:

Pattern:

15. Look for Patterns in Learning

How does the candidate describe changing their mind?

What has experience taught them?

How do they respond when something does not work?

How do they describe feedback?

Pattern:

Over a long pastorate, a candidate's capacity to learn may matter more than having the right answer today.

16. Look for Patterns in Theology

Return to **FM 6.1 — Describing Our Lived Theology** and the theological conversations in the search.

Ask not only:

What does the candidate believe?

but:

How does theology function in their ministry?

Candidate consistently speaks about God as:

Scripture appears in their thinking as:

Grace appears as:

Church appears as:

Mission appears as:

Pattern:

17. Look for Patterns in Spiritual Formation

Candidate's spiritual practices include:

When describing difficult ministry, they draw upon:

When discerning, they tend to:

When describing growth, they mention:

Pattern:

Do not look for a preferred spirituality; look for evidence of an ongoing life of formation.

18. Look for Patterns in Mission

When the candidate speaks about mission, where does the movement begin?

☐ Congregational programs

☐ Community needs

☐ Community assets

☐ Relationships

☐ Scripture/theology

☐ Evangelism

☐ Justice

☐ Service

☐ Partnerships

☐ Congregational gifts

☐ Other: _____

Examples:

Pattern:

How does this pattern relate to our congregation's understanding of mission?

19. Look for Patterns in How the Candidate Encounters Place

Think especially about the community tour.

Candidate noticed:

Candidate asked about:

Candidate wanted to meet:

Candidate became curious about:

Candidate quickly proposed:

Candidate resisted proposing until understanding:

Pattern:

20. Look for Patterns in Pastoral Care

Across stories and conversations:

The candidate tends to understand pastoral care as:

Their stories emphasize:

☐ Presence

☐ Listening

☐ Prayer

☐ Problem solving

☐ Crisis response

☐ Congregational caregiving

☐ Referral

☐ Boundaries

☐ Shared ministry

☐ Other: _____

Pattern:

_____

_____

How does this relate to our expectations?

_____

_____

_____

21. Look for Patterns in Boundaries

What have we learned about:

Time

_____

Days off

_____

Family

_____

Confidentiality

_____

Pastoral relationships

Staff relationships

Availability

Pattern:

Healthy ministry requires both availability and boundaries. Notice how the candidate holds them together.

22. Look for Patterns in Staff Relationships

Candidate tends to describe staff as:

When staff disagree:

When staff make mistakes:

When staff have expertise the candidate does not:

During actual staff interaction we noticed:

Pattern:

23. Look for Patterns in Questions Asked of Us

The candidate's questions are part of the evidence.

Across the search, they have repeatedly asked about:

What appears especially important to them?

What do their questions suggest they are discerning about us?

Pattern:

24. Look for Patterns in What the Candidate Does Not Ask

Be careful here.

Absence is weaker evidence than presence, but repeated absence may invite curiosity.

We have not heard much curiosity about:

_____

_____

Is this important to the ministry?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Could the candidate already have sufficient information?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Should we explore it?

Do not convert silence into a conclusion; turn it into a question if necessary.

25. Look for Patterns Across Settings

Complete the grid.

Area	Written Materials	Interviews	Weekend	References	Pattern
Leadership	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Listening	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Theology	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Mission	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Collaboration	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Differences	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Learning	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Pastoral Care	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Do not force every box to contain something. Blank spaces are better than invented evidence.

---

26. Patterns That Have Strengthened

Early in the search we noticed:

Later we saw:

During the weekend:

References added:

We now believe this is a strong pattern:

27. Patterns That Have Weakened

Sometimes an early impression does not survive additional contact.

Early impression:

What later complicated it?

We now understand it differently:

This is one reason not to decide too early.

---

28. Patterns That Contradict One Another

Human beings are complicated.

A candidate may appear:

- **highly collaborative in one context and directive in another**
- **deeply relational and strongly boundaried**
- **patient with congregations and impatient with systems**
- **confident in leadership and uncertain in unfamiliar settings**

Contradiction does not automatically mean inconsistency.

Pattern A:

Pattern B:

They appear contradictory because:

Could both be true?

What context seems to make the difference?

Do we need further clarification?

29. Inconsistencies Worth Exploring

Some contradictions do require attention.

Candidate said:

Elsewhere we heard or observed:

Why might this matter?

Possible explanations:

Question to explore:

Do not resolve inconsistencies by choosing whichever version you prefer. Become curious.

30. What Do References Reinforce?

References should not create an entirely new candidate.

Ask:

A pattern references reinforced:

Evidence:

A pattern references complicated:

Something references added:

Something we should explore further:

A strong reference conversation gives texture to patterns already emerging.

31. Watch for the Halo Effect

One exceptional strength can cause everything else to look stronger.

Perhaps the candidate:

- **preached exceptionally well**
- **has impressive experience**
- **is charismatic**
- **shares the committee's theology**
- **has a strong résumé**
- **connected immediately with everyone**

The strength most likely to influence us:

Ask:

Are we allowing this strength to answer questions it cannot answer?

What do we still need to evaluate independently?

---

32. Watch for the Horn Effect

One concern can color everything else.

Perhaps:

8. **one answer was awkward**
9. **one committee member felt uncomfortable**
10. **one sermon illustration bothered someone**
11. **one reference raised a question**
12. **one interaction went poorly**

Concern most likely to influence everything else:

Ask:

Are we allowing one concern to reinterpret the entire search?

Is it part of a pattern?

Is it significant enough to stand alone?

What further understanding is needed?

---

33. Look for Patterns in Ourselves

The committee has patterns too.

Across the search, we have repeatedly:

☐ Focused on preaching

☐ Focused on pastoral care

☐ Worried about conflict

☐ Looked for charisma

☐ Compared candidates with a former pastor

☐ Wanted reassurance about growth

☐ Avoided financial questions

☐ Avoided theological differences

☐ Become excited about new ideas

☐ Become anxious about change

☐ Other: _____

Our pattern:

What might it reveal about us?

The candidate is not the only person being revealed by the search.

34. Patterns of Congregational Hope

What are we repeatedly hoping this candidate will do?

Are we hoping the pastor will:

☐ Grow the church

☐ Bring young families

☐ Resolve old differences

☐ Increase giving

☐ Revitalize worship

☐ Develop mission

☐ Fix staffing

☐ Provide pastoral care

☐ Create vision

☐ Recruit volunteers

☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

Which of these belong appropriately to pastoral leadership?

Which belong to pastor and congregation together?

Which may be unrealistic?

Do not mistake our hopes for evidence about the candidate.

35. Patterns of Congregational Fear

Across the search, what have we repeatedly feared?

Fear of:

☐ Change

☐ Conflict

☐ Losing members

☐ Another difficult pastorate

☐ Financial decline

☐ A strong leader

☐ A weak leader

☐ Theological difference

☐ Starting the search again

☐ Making the wrong decision

☐ Other: _____

How might this fear be shaping what we notice?

Fear is information about us; do not automatically make it information about the candidate.

36. Significant Gifts

Identify no more than five patterns that appear to represent significant gifts for this ministry.

Gift 1

Pattern:

Evidence across the search:

Why it matters here:

Gift 2

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

Gift 3

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

Gift 4

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

Gift 5

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

37. Significant Concerns

Identify only concerns that remain significant after looking across the whole search.

Concern 1

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

Needs:

☐ Clarification

☐ Further conversation

☐ Reference follow-up

☐ Serious consideration

☐ No additional information

Concern 2

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

Needs:

☐ Clarification

☐ Further conversation

☐ Reference follow-up

☐ Serious consideration

☐ No additional information

Concern 3

Pattern:

Evidence:

Why it matters:

---

38. Difference Is Not Necessarily Concern

Identify ways the candidate differs from the congregation or committee.

Difference:

Ask:

Is it a difference in:

☐ Personality

☐ Generation

☐ Experience

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership style

☐ Worship preference

☐ Communication

☐ Culture

☐ Other: _____

Does it threaten faithful ministry?

Could it strengthen faithful ministry?

Does it simply make us uncomfortable?

What might we learn through it?

Do not convert difference into deficiency.

---

39. What Has the Candidate Been Learning About Us?

Look for patterns in the candidate's response to the congregation.

They repeatedly became curious about:

They repeatedly returned to:

They seemed energized by:

They raised concerns about:

They asked us to clarify:

What pattern might be emerging in their discernment?

Mutual discernment moves in both directions.

40. Where Candidate and Congregation Meet

Now bring the two stories together.

Congregation brings:

Candidate brings:

We share energy around:

Candidate may strengthen us in:

We may offer the candidate:

We may experience tension around:

We may need to grow together in:

41. The Partnership Question

Do not ask only:

Is this a strong candidate?

Ask:

What kind of ministry might become possible through this particular partnership?

What can we imagine together that we could not imagine as clearly before?

What gives us energy about that possibility?

What gives us pause?

42. What Would This Call Require of the Candidate?

This congregation would ask the candidate to:

Grow in:

Exercise patience around:

Lead courageously around:

Share leadership around:

Is that reasonable?

43. What Would This Call Require of Us?

This candidate would likely ask us to:

Grow in:

Take responsibility for:

Release:

Learn:

Are we willing?

A call cannot be discerned by examining only one side of the relationship.

44. What Does Not Fit the Pattern?

Look deliberately for evidence that challenges your emerging conclusion.

Our emerging conclusion is:

Evidence that supports it:

Evidence that does not fit:

Have we taken that evidence seriously?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does it change our interpretation?

Good discernment does not hide inconvenient evidence.

---

45. What Would We Say If We Had to Describe the Candidate Without Adjectives?

Do not say:

visionary

warm

strong

collaborative

pastoral

dynamic

Describe what the person actually does.

We have repeatedly seen this candidate:

This exercise can reveal whether the committee truly knows the candidate.

---

46. The Candidate in Five Patterns

After reviewing the entire search, complete this together.

Pattern 1

Pattern 2

Pattern 3

Pattern 4

Pattern 5

Now ask:

If these patterns continued into ministry here, what kind of pastor-congregation relationship might emerge?

47. The Congregation in Five Patterns

Turn the same lens toward yourselves.

Pattern 1

Pattern 2

Pattern 3

Pattern 4

Pattern 5

Then ask:

If our patterns and the candidate's patterns meet, what might happen?

That is closer to the real question of call.

---

48. What Still Requires Clarification?

After reviewing the whole search, list only questions that remain genuinely important.

Question 1

Why it matters:

Question 2

Why it matters:

Question 3

Why it matters:

For each ask:

Do we need an answer before proceeding?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do not create additional questions simply because asking feels safer than deciding.

---

49. What Cannot Be Known?

Some things cannot be known before ministry begins.

You cannot know with certainty:

11. **how every relationship will develop**
12. **how the candidate will respond to every future crisis**
13. **whether the congregation will grow**
14. **whether every member will like the pastor**
15. **whether an unexpected challenge will arise**
16. **how the candidate will change**
17. **how the congregation will change**

Something we wish we could know:

Can it actually be known now?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

Can we proceed faithfully without knowing?

Discernment is not prediction.

---

50. What Are We Recognizing?

After the committee has reviewed the patterns, allow silence.

Then complete:

We recognize significant gifts in:

_____

_____

We recognize concerns around:

_____

_____

We recognize strong convergence around:

_____

_____

We recognize differences around:

_____

_____

We recognize that we still need:

_____

_____

We recognize that we may never know:

---

51. The Next Faithful Step

Now ask:

Given everything we have learned across the whole search, what is the next faithful step?

☐ Continue discernment

☐ Ask focused follow-up questions

☐ Complete reference work

☐ Clarify Terms of Call

☐ Consult presbytery

☐ Allow additional time

☐ Discern no

☐ Move toward extending a call

☐ Other: _____

Our next step:

Why:

Person responsible:

Date:

52. Final Reflection

Before closing, each committee member completes:

A pattern I see more clearly now:

Something I had given too much weight:

Something I had given too little weight:

Something another committee member helped me recognize:

Something I still hold with humility:

Leader's Note

At the end of a search, committees often want one decisive piece of evidence.

The sermon.

The reference.

The interview answer.

The weekend.

The feeling around the table.

But pastoral calls are rarely revealed in one moment; they emerge through accumulation.

A candidate tells one story about a difficult session meeting.

Later they describe a staff disagreement.

During the community tour, someone challenges an assumption they have made.

At dinner, a committee member disagrees with them.

Different situations, yet perhaps the candidate does something similar each time.

They become curious.

They ask another question.

They resist defending themselves immediately.

They try to understand what the other person sees.

Now you are not evaluating one answer; you are recognizing a pattern.

The same can happen with concerns.

One awkward response may mean very little.

But when the same behavior appears in several stories, in a scenario, during an interview, and again during the weekend, the committee should pay attention.

Patterns do not eliminate judgment; they make judgment more trustworthy.

And remember that the candidate is not the only one whose patterns have become visible.

Throughout this search, your committee has revealed what excites you, what frightens you, what you avoid, what you hope a pastor will do for you, and what kind of future you are willing—or unwilling—to imagine.

Those patterns belong in the discernment too.

The final question is therefore not simply:

What kind of pastor is this person?

It is:

What might happen when the patterns of this pastor and the patterns of this congregation begin living together?

That is the relationship you are discerning.

FM 9.4

Reference Conversation Guide

Purpose

References are neither a final check to make sure nothing is wrong with the candidate nor simply people who will tell you the candidate is wonderful.

A good reference conversation adds another perspective to patterns the Search Committee has already begun to recognize.

By the time you contact references, you should know enough about the candidate to ask focused questions.

Instead of:

"Tell us about this candidate."

you can ask:

"We have heard several stories suggesting that this candidate tends to slow things down and listen carefully when disagreement develops. What have you observed?"

That creates a very different reference conversation.

The purpose is not to ask references to make the decision for you.

It is to ask:

What have you experienced of this person that can help us understand them more fully?

Use this guide with **FM 4.6 — Listening for Patterns During Interviews**, **FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions**, and **FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search**.

---

1. References Come After Relationship

Reference conversations become more useful after the committee has spent significant time with the candidate.

By then you have:

☐ Read the candidate's materials

☐ Conducted initial conversations

☐ Heard ministry stories

☐ Asked follow-up questions

☐ Explored scenarios

☐ Discussed theology

☐ Begun recognizing patterns

☐ Identified questions that remain

☐ Other: _____

You are no longer asking references to introduce the candidate, but to deepen your understanding.

---

2. Confirm Permission

Before contacting anyone:

☐ Candidate has given permission to contact references

☐ Candidate knows references are being contacted

☐ Denominational procedures have been followed

☐ Confidentiality expectations are clear

☐ Committee knows who will make the calls

Do not contact people who are not listed as references without the candidate's explicit permission.

Mishandled confidentiality can place a candidate's current ministry at risk.

---

3. Do Not Conduct a Back-Channel Search

Avoid:

"I know somebody who knows somebody at that church."

"Let's call a member of their current congregation."

"I found someone from their old church online."

"My friend knows their executive presbyter."

If the committee wants to speak with someone who is not an identified reference, ask the candidate first.

Person we would like to contact:

Why?

Candidate permission received:

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, do not contact them.

---

4. Know Why You Are Calling This Reference

Before the conversation, identify what this particular person may know.

Reference:

Relationship to candidate:

Organization/congregation:

Years they have known candidate:

Context in which they worked together:

This reference may particularly help us understand:

Do not ask every reference exactly the same questions.

---

5. Prepare From the Search

Before calling, review **FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search**.

Identify:

A pattern we want to explore:

A gift we want to understand more fully:

A concern or uncertainty:

Something the candidate has told us that this reference may have experienced:

This makes the reference conversation part of discernment rather than a generic checklist.

6. Opening the Conversation

Introduce yourself.

Explain:

- **the congregation**
- **your role in the search**
- **that the candidate provided their name as a reference**
- **the approximate length of the conversation**
- **that you are interested in their actual experience of the candidate**

A useful opening is:

"Thank you for speaking with me. _____ has given us permission to contact you as part of our discernment. We have spent considerable time getting to know them, so rather than asking you for a general recommendation, I would like to hear about your experience of working with them. Specific stories or examples are especially helpful."

Then begin.

7. Establish the Relationship

Ask:

How do you know the candidate?

Notes:

How long have you known them?

In what contexts have you worked together?

How closely did you work together?

This clarifies the perspective from which the reference is speaking.

8. Ask for a Story Early

Rather than beginning with a list of traits, ask:

When you think about this person's ministry or leadership, what story comes to mind first?

Notes:

Then follow:

Why does that story stand out to you?

What does it help us understand about them?

Stories often reveal more than adjectives.

9. What Gives the Candidate Energy?

Ask:

What kinds of ministry seem to give this person energy?

When have you seen them most fully engaged?

What were they doing?

Does this reinforce something we have noticed?

10. Leadership

Instead of:

"Is this person a strong leader?"

ask:

Tell me about a time you watched this person lead something significant.

Follow with:

What did they actually do?

How did other people respond?

What happened when the work became difficult?

Pattern we hear:

11. Collaboration

Ask:

What is it like to work with this person when a decision has to be made?

How do they involve other people?

What happens when someone has expertise they do not have?

Can you think of an example?

Listen for behavior rather than labels.

12. Power and Authority

Ask:

How have you seen this person use the authority of their role?

Follow if useful:

How do they respond when someone challenges their leadership?

How do they relate to people who have less formal power?

Example:

13. Differences and Conflict

Avoid:

"Does the candidate handle conflict well?"

Ask:

Tell me about a time you saw this person involved in a significant disagreement.

Then:

What did they do first?

What did they do when the disagreement continued?

How did they relate to people who disagreed with them?

What was the outcome?

What, if anything, do you think they learned?

14. When the Candidate Is Wrong

This can be one of the most useful questions:

Can you remember a time when this person was wrong about something that mattered?

Allow silence.

Notes:

Then ask:

How did they discover they were wrong?

What did they do next?

You are not looking for perfection, but for the capacity to learn.

15. Receiving Feedback

Ask:

What happens when someone gives this person difficult feedback?

Can you remember a particular example?

Did anything change afterward?

Pattern:

16. Failure

Ask:

Tell me about something this person attempted that did not work.

Follow with:

How did they respond?

How did they talk about their own responsibility?

What did they learn?

What changed afterward?

Failure can reveal formation.

17. Staff Relationships

If the candidate will supervise or work closely with staff, ask a reference who has seen them in that context.

What is this person like as a colleague or supervisor?

Then move toward examples:

Tell me about a staff relationship that worked particularly well.

Why did it work?

Tell me about a staff relationship that was more difficult.

What did the candidate contribute to the difficulty?

How did they respond?

18. Working With Governing Boards

If relevant:

What have you observed about this person's relationship with a session, board, council, or other governing body?

They tend to:

☐ Prepare carefully

☐ Build relationships

☐ Teach

☐ Facilitate

☐ Advocate strongly

☐ Delegate

☐ Seek consensus

☐ Make recommendations

☐ Avoid difficult decisions

☐ Other: _____

Example:

19. Pastoral Care

Ask:

What have you observed about this person as a pastor to people?

Then:

Can you tell me a story that illustrates that?

How do they balance caring personally with helping a congregation care for one another?

What boundaries have you observed?

20. Preaching and Worship

If the reference has experienced this part of the candidate's ministry:

What have you noticed about their preaching over time?

That phrase matters: over time.

A reference may know what a Search Committee cannot learn from one sermon.

Ask:

How has their preaching developed?

What seems especially characteristic of it?

Where does it seem strongest?

Where might continued growth be helpful?

21. Theology in Ministry

Rather than asking the reference to evaluate the candidate's statement of faith:

How have you seen this person's theological convictions shape the way they actually practice ministry?

Example:

How do they engage people whose theology differs from their own?

22. Mission and Community

Ask:

How does this person relate to the community beyond the congregation?

Can you give an example?

Do they tend to begin new ministries themselves, develop partnerships, strengthen existing work, or something else?

What pattern do you hear?

23. Change

Ask:

Tell me about a significant change this person helped lead.

Then:

How did they introduce the change?

Who was involved?

What resistance emerged?

How did they respond?

What would they probably do differently now?

24. Boundaries

Ask where appropriate:

What have you observed about this person's ability to maintain healthy boundaries in ministry?

Possible areas:

☐ Time

☐ Days off

☐ Family

☐ Confidentiality

☐ Pastoral relationships

☐ Staff

☐ Congregational expectations

☐ Other: _____

Example:

Avoid questions about private family matters.

25. Stress

Ask:

What have you observed when this person is under significant stress?

How does stress become visible?

What helps them regain perspective?

What should people working closely with them understand?

This question often produces useful, realistic information.

26. Growth Edges

Avoid the predictable:

"What are their weaknesses?"

Try:

Where have you seen this person grow during the time you have known them?

Then:

Where do you think continued growth would serve them well?

What kind of environment helps them grow?

A thoughtful reference can usually answer these questions.

27. What Is Hard About Working With Them?

Ask directly but respectfully:

If I were going to work closely with this person, what might I sometimes find difficult?

Then stop talking.

Notes:

Follow with:

Can you give me an example?

This is often more useful than asking for weaknesses.

28. What Do People Misunderstand About Them?

Ask:

Is there something people sometimes misunderstand about this person when they first meet them?

What do people discover over time?

This may help interpret something the committee has already noticed.

---

29. What Will We Need to Learn About Them?

Ask:

If this person became our pastor, what would we need to learn about them in order to work well together?

This question moves beyond evaluation toward relationship.

---

30. What Will They Need From Us?

Ask:

What kind of congregation or leadership environment helps this person do their best ministry?

What do they need from colleagues or lay leaders?

What tends to make their work more difficult?

The committee is not simply asking whether the candidate can serve the congregation; it is discerning whether the congregation can become a healthy context for the candidate's ministry.

---

31. A Pattern We Want to Test

Now use what the committee already knows.

We have been noticing:

Ask:

"Across several conversations, we have noticed _____. Does that sound consistent with your experience?"

Reference response:

Then:

"Can you give us an example?"

Do not signal the answer you hope to hear.

32. A Gift We Want to Understand Better

We have noticed this possible gift:

Ask:

"We have begun to see _____ as a significant strength. How have you experienced that?"

Example:

Does the reference:

☐ Reinforce the pattern

☐ Complicate it

☐ Add context

☐ Disagree

☐ Have insufficient experience to comment

---

33. A Concern We Want to Explore

Do not ask leading questions.

Avoid:

"We are concerned that the candidate may be controlling. Have you noticed that?"

Instead:

"We are trying to understand how the candidate responds when others strongly disagree with a direction they believe is important. What have you observed?"

Our underlying concern:

Neutral question:

Response:

What does this add?

---

34. Something That Seems Inconsistent

If appropriate:

"We have heard the candidate describe themselves as _____, while in another conversation we heard _____. We are trying to understand how those fit together. What have you observed?"

Notes:

Do not ask the reference to choose which version is true. Invite context.

35. What Has Changed Over Time?

For a long-term reference:

How is this person different today from when you first knew them?

Where have you seen the most growth?

What do you think contributed to that growth?

This can reveal whether formation is ongoing.

36. What Should We Not Miss?

Near the end, ask:

What have I not asked that you think we should understand about this person?

Then listen.

Sometimes the most important information arrives here.

37. The Partnership Question

Describe the congregation briefly and honestly.

Then ask:

Given what I have told you about our congregation and what you know about this person, where do you imagine this partnership might be especially fruitful?

Then:

Where might it require particular attention?

Do not ask:

"Do you think we should call them?"

That decision belongs to the committee.

38. The Rehire Question

If the reference has supervised or worked closely with the candidate, you may ask:

If the circumstances were appropriate, would you choose to work with this person again?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Qualified answer

Explanation:

The explanation is usually more useful than the yes or no.

---

39. The Trust Question

A useful closing question:

Would you trust this person with significant pastoral and leadership responsibility?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Qualified answer

Then ask:

What leads you to that answer?

Listen carefully to qualifications.

---

40. Listen to How the Reference Answers

Do not evaluate only content.

Notice:

Reference answers are:

☐ Specific

☐ General

☐ Enthusiastic

☐ Thoughtful

☐ Guarded

☐ Balanced

☐ Highly polished

☐ Hesitant

☐ Other: _____

Reference readily gives examples:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Reference can name growth areas:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Reference distinguishes experience from opinion:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Something about the conversation I noticed:

Be cautious about interpreting tone without context.

41. Follow the Story

If the reference says:

“She's a wonderful leader.”

ask:

“Can you tell me about a time you saw that?”

If:

“He's excellent with conflict.”

ask:

"What did you see him do?"

If:

"She can be difficult."

ask:

"Help me understand what that looks like."

If:

"Everybody loved him."

ask:

"What did people particularly value?"

Move from adjectives toward experience.

---

42. Allow Silence

Some questions require thought.

Especially:

What is hard about working with them?

Where do they still need to grow?

What happens when they are under stress?

What should we understand that I haven't asked?

Ask.

Then wait.

Do not rescue the reference from silence by answering your own question.

---

43. Do Not Cross Appropriate Boundaries

Do not ask about:

- **private marital relationships**
- **children's behavior**
- **medical information**
- **private counseling**
- **rumors**
- **protected personal information**
- **matters unrelated to the candidate's capacity for ministry**

Ask only what is appropriate to the call you are discerning.

---

44. If a Reference Raises a Serious Concern

Do not panic, dismiss it, or immediately call another reference looking for reassurance.

Record carefully:

What exactly was said?

Was it firsthand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What specific example was given?

When did it occur?

What was the context?

Was the matter resolved?

Does it connect with anything we have observed?

Then determine the appropriate next step.

---

45. Firsthand or Secondhand?

Ask:

"Was that something you experienced directly?"

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

"What did you personally observe?"

Secondhand information should not become established fact.

---

46. If the Reference Cannot Name a Weakness

Do not automatically conclude that the candidate has none.

Ask differently:

"What kind of ministry requires more effort from them?"

or:

"Where have you seen them need support?"

or:

"What would a new congregation need to learn about working well with them?"

A reference who knows someone well should usually be able to describe complexity.

---

47. If Every Reference Sounds Identical

Ask whether your questions are producing generic answers.

If every reference says:

"Great preacher."

"Wonderful pastor."

"Strong leader."

"People love them."

you may not yet have learned much.

Return to stories.

Ask:

"Can you give me an example?"

---

48. Closing the Conversation

Before ending:

"Is there anything you would like to add that would help us understand this person more fully?"

_____

_____

Then thank the reference.

Do not disclose:

- **committee opinions**
- **other candidates**
- **confidential congregational discussion**
- **how close the committee is to a decision**

_____

49. Immediately After the Call

Before speaking with another committee member, record:

Three things I heard:

- _____
- _____
- _____

A pattern reinforced:

_____

_____

A pattern complicated:

_____

_____

Something new:

Something requiring follow-up:

My own interpretation:

Keep observation and interpretation distinct.

50. Reference Conversation Record

Candidate:

Reference:

Relationship:

Date:

Committee member conducting conversation:

Length of relationship:

Context:

Significant stories:

Gifts observed:

Growth areas:

Patterns reinforced:

Patterns complicated:

New information:

Concerns:

Follow-up needed:

51. Compare References

After all reference conversations are complete, ask:

Pattern several references reinforced:

Another:

Area where references differed:

Why might their experiences differ?

Something only one reference mentioned:

Is it significant?

Why?

Different references know different parts of a person; do not expect identical accounts.

52. Compare References With the Candidate

Ask:

Something references confirmed from candidate stories:

Something they added:

Something they interpreted differently:

Something that appears inconsistent:

Does the inconsistency require clarification?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

53. Do Not Count Positive and Negative Comments

Avoid:

Three positive references.

One concern.

Therefore:

75% positive.

References are not votes.

One specific, credible observation may matter more than ten generic compliments.

Likewise, one person's difficult relationship with the candidate does not automatically outweigh years of healthy ministry.

Interpret information in context.

---

54. Return to the Pattern Map

After reference conversations, return to **FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search**.

Pattern:

References:

☐ Reinforced it

☐ Complicated it

☐ Challenged it

☐ Added context

What we understand now:

Pattern:

References:

☐ Reinforced it

☐ Complicated it

☐ Challenged it

☐ Added context

What we understand now:

---

55. What Needs to Go Back to the Candidate?

If a reference raises something significant that may affect the committee's discernment, consider whether fairness requires conversation with the candidate.

Issue:

Is it significant to our discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the candidate need opportunity to respond?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Appropriate question:

Do not make a consequential judgment from information the candidate has had no reasonable opportunity to address.

---

56. Final Reference Reflection

After completing all reference conversations:

What do we understand more clearly?

What patterns are stronger?

What patterns are more complicated?

What concerns remain?

What questions remain?

Did references materially change our understanding?

If so, how?

57. Reference Conversation Checklist

Before:

☐ Candidate permission confirmed

☐ Denominational requirements reviewed

☐ Reference relationship understood

☐ Candidate materials reviewed

☐ Emerging patterns reviewed

☐ Questions customized

☐ Concerns translated into neutral questions

During:

☐ Relationship clarified

☐ Stories requested

☐ Follow-up questions asked

☐ Specific examples requested

☐ Firsthand/secondhand distinguished

☐ Silence allowed

☐ Appropriate boundaries maintained

☐ Notes taken carefully

After:

☐ Observations recorded before interpretation

☐ Patterns identified

☐ Significant concerns documented accurately

☐ References compared

☐ Candidate follow-up identified if needed

☐ Pattern map updated

☐ Confidentiality maintained

---

58. The Final Question

When the reference work is complete, do not ask:

Did the references approve the candidate?

Ask:

What can we now see more clearly about this person because people who have actually shared ministry with them have helped us see?

And then:

How does what we have learned fit the patterns we have been recognizing throughout the search?

Leader's Note

A weak reference check sounds like this:

"Is she a good preacher?"

Yes.

"Is she good with people?"

Absolutely.

"Does she work well with staff?"

Very well.

"Any weaknesses?"

She works too hard.

"Would you recommend her?"

Without hesitation.

Twenty minutes later, the committee has checked the reference box and learned almost nothing.

The problem was not the reference, but the questions.

By this stage, you know enough about the candidate to have a real conversation.

You have heard stories.

You have watched patterns emerge.

You have questions.

Ask the reference about those things.

Ask for stories.

Ask what happened when something failed.

Ask what happens when the candidate is wrong.

Ask what they are like under stress.

Ask what can be difficult about working with them.

Ask where they have grown.

Ask what kind of congregation helps them flourish.

And when a reference gives you an adjective, ask for the story underneath it.

References should not decide whether you call the candidate. They offer something more valuable.

They let you see the candidate through the experience of people who have already shared life and ministry with them.

Their perspective will not be complete. Neither is yours.

But placed alongside the candidate's stories, your interviews, your observations, and your emerging understanding, it may help another piece of the pattern come into focus.

References are not the final verdict; they are another voice in the conversation of discernment.

FM 9.5

Suggested Reference Questions

Purpose

A reference conversation should not become another interview.

You are talking with someone who has actually known, worked with, worshiped with, supervised, or shared ministry with the candidate. The distinctive value of that conversation is **experience**.

The most useful reference questions ask:

What have you seen?

Can you tell me a story?

What happens when…?

This resource is a question bank, not a script.

Choose questions that help you explore the patterns and unanswered questions that have emerged during the search. **FM 9.4 — Reference Conversation Guide** provides the process for conducting the conversation; this resource provides questions to choose from.

Most reference conversations need only six to ten well-chosen questions and thoughtful follow-ups.

Ask fewer questions. Listen longer. Follow the story.

---

1. Understanding the Relationship

Use enough questions to understand what the reference has actually been in a position to observe.

- How do you know the candidate?
- How long have you known them?
- In what settings have you worked or served together?
- How closely did you work together?
- What parts of their ministry have you been able to observe directly?
- Are there areas of their ministry you have had little opportunity to observe?

Notes

---

2. Beginning With a Story

These work well as opening questions.

- When you think about this person's ministry, what story comes to mind first?
- Tell me about a time when you saw this person at their best.
- What experience with this candidate most helps me understand who they are as a pastor?
- Can you tell me about a moment when you thought, *This is why this person is called to ministry*?
- What story would you tell someone who wanted to understand this candidate beyond their résumé?

Follow-up

Why does that story stand out to you?

---

3. Vocation and Energy

- What kinds of ministry seem to give this person energy?
- When have you seen them most engaged?
- What seems to matter deeply to them?
- What kinds of ministry do they naturally move toward?
- What kinds of ministry require more effort from them?
- What do you think they understand themselves to be called to do?
- Where have you seen their gifts make a particular difference?

Follow-up

Can you give me an example?

---

4. Leadership

- Tell me about a time you watched this person lead something significant.
- What do they tend to do first when leadership is needed?
- How do they make significant decisions?
- How do they bring other people into leadership?
- How do they respond when people resist a direction they believe is important?
- What happens when a decision has to be made and consensus is not possible?
- How do they balance listening with deciding?
- What happens when their preferred approach is not working?
- How has their leadership changed during the time you have known them?

Follow-up

What did they actually do?

---

5. Collaboration

13. What is it like to work with this person?
14. How do they involve other people in decisions?
15. What happens when someone else has more expertise than they do?
16. How do they respond to ideas that are not their own?
17. How do they share credit?
18. How do they delegate?
19. What happens when someone working with them makes a mistake?
20. What do they need from colleagues in order to work well?
21. What can sometimes be difficult about working with them?

Follow-up

Tell me about a time when you experienced that.

---

6. Staff Relationships

For references who have observed the candidate working with staff:

18. What are they like as a colleague?
19. What are they like as a supervisor?
20. How do they communicate expectations?

21. How do they respond when staff disagree with them?
22. How do they address performance concerns?
23. How do they handle staff mistakes?
24. How do they recognize the gifts and expertise of staff members?
25. Tell me about a staff relationship that worked particularly well.
26. Tell me about a staff relationship that was difficult.
27. What did the candidate contribute to that difficulty?
28. How did they respond?

Follow-up

What did you learn about them through that experience?

---

7. Governing Boards and Lay Leadership

9. What have you observed about their relationship with a session, board, council, or other governing body?
10. How do they prepare leaders for difficult decisions?
11. How do they respond when the governing body disagrees with them?
12. Do they tend to teach, facilitate, advocate, persuade, or something else?
13. How do they develop lay leadership?
14. How do they respond when lay leaders have strong opinions?
15. How do they handle situations in which authority and responsibility are unclear?
16. What have you observed about their ability to share leadership?

---

8. Power and Authority

13. How does this person use the authority of their role?
14. What happens when their authority is challenged?
15. How do they relate to people who have less institutional power?
16. How do they respond when someone tells them no?
17. How do they respond when they have the authority to act but others disagree?
18. Have you ever seen them misuse authority or exercise it poorly?
19. If so, what happened afterward?
20. What have you observed about their awareness of the power that accompanies pastoral leadership?

These questions may require time. Allow silence.

---

9. Differences and Conflict

7. Tell me about a significant disagreement you watched this person navigate.
8. What did they do first?
9. What happens when someone strongly disagrees with them?
10. How do they respond when they feel misunderstood?
11. How do they engage people whose theology differs from their own?
12. What happens when conflict becomes personal?
13. Do they tend to address difficult issues early or wait?
14. How do they respond when reconciliation is not immediately possible?
15. What have you seen them learn from conflict?
16. What would you want us to understand about the way they live with differences?

Follow-up

What happened next?

---

10. When They Are Wrong

These questions can be especially revealing.

1. Can you remember a time when this person was wrong about something that mattered?
2. How did they discover they were wrong?
3. How did they respond?
4. Have you heard them apologize?
5. What happens when someone points out something they have missed?
6. Can they change their mind publicly?
7. How do they repair a relationship after they have contributed to a problem?
8. What have you seen them learn from being wrong?

Do not look for someone who is never wrong. Look for what happens when they are.

---

11. Feedback

1. What happens when this person receives difficult feedback?
2. How do they distinguish useful criticism from criticism they should not follow?
3. Can you remember a time when feedback changed something they were doing?
4. What kind of feedback do they receive well?
5. What kind is harder for them to hear?
6. How do they give difficult feedback to others?

7. What have you observed about their capacity for self-reflection?

---

12. Failure and Learning

1. Tell me about something this person attempted that did not work.
2. How did they respond?
3. How did they understand their own responsibility?
4. What did they learn?
5. What did they do differently afterward?
6. How do they talk about failures?
7. What have you seen them learn through experience?
8. Where have you seen significant growth?
9. What does this person do when they realize they do not know what to do?

Follow-up

What changed because of what they learned?

---

13. Pastoral Care

1. What have you observed about this person as a pastor to people?
2. Tell me a story that illustrates how they provide pastoral care.
3. What kinds of pastoral situations seem to draw out their strongest gifts?
4. What situations are more difficult for them?
5. How do they respond when they cannot fix someone's problem?
6. How do they balance personal pastoral care with developing a congregation that cares for one another?
7. What boundaries have you observed in their pastoral relationships?
8. How do people tend to experience them during crisis?

---

14. Preaching

For references who have heard the candidate preach over time:

1. How would you describe their preaching without using adjectives?
2. What do they consistently do in sermons?
3. How do they engage Scripture?
4. How does their preaching connect Scripture with people's lives?

5. What themes appear repeatedly?
6. How has their preaching developed?
7. Where is their preaching particularly strong?
8. Where could it continue to grow?
9. How do they respond to feedback about preaching?
10. What would we learn from hearing them preach for a year that we could never learn from one sermon?

That final question can be especially useful.

---

15. Worship

1. What role does worship seem to play in this person's understanding of ministry?
2. How do they prepare for worship?
3. How do they work with musicians and other worship leaders?
4. How do they respond to different worship preferences?
5. How comfortable are they adapting worship while respecting a congregation's traditions?
6. What have you noticed about their leadership of prayer, sacraments, funerals, weddings, or other significant services?
7. How do they help worship connect with the life and mission of the congregation?

---

16. Theology

1. How have you seen this person's theology shape their ministry?
2. What theological convictions seem especially important to them?
3. How does Scripture function in their decision-making?
4. How do they respond when faithful people interpret Scripture differently?
5. How does their theology influence the way they understand mission?
6. How does it shape pastoral care?
7. How does it shape leadership?
8. Have you seen their theology change or deepen over time?
9. What theological conversations seem to energize them?
10. What would we need to understand about their theology in order to minister well together?

---

17. Spiritual Formation

1. What have you observed about this person's spiritual life?

2. What seems to sustain them in ministry?
3. How do they respond spiritually during difficult seasons?
4. How does prayer enter their leadership?
5. What practices appear to keep them grounded?
6. How do they continue learning and growing?
7. Who or what seems able to challenge them?
8. What have you observed about their humility?
9. How has ministry formed them?

Do not ask a reference to disclose private spiritual conversations.

---

18. Mission

1. How does this person understand mission?
2. Tell me about a ministry beyond the congregation in which you saw them deeply engaged.
3. How do they learn about the community around a congregation?
4. Do they tend to begin with programs, needs, relationships, partnerships, assets, or something else?
5. How do they help congregations become curious about their communities?
6. What have you observed about their ability to build community partnerships?
7. How do they understand the relationship between congregational life and mission?
8. What seems to animate them when they talk about the church's vocation?

---

19. Change

1. Tell me about a significant change this person helped lead.
2. What did they do before proposing the change?
3. Who became involved?
4. How did they communicate?
5. How did they respond to resistance?
6. How did they determine how quickly to move?
7. What happened when people did not come along?
8. What did they learn?
9. What would they probably do differently today?
10. When have you seen them decide *not* to make a change?

---

20. Innovation and Imagination

1. Tell me about a time this person saw a possibility others had not noticed.
2. Where do new ideas tend to come from for them?
3. How do they respond to ideas proposed by others?
4. How do they distinguish an interesting idea from something worth pursuing?
5. What happens when an experiment fails?
6. Are they comfortable beginning something without knowing exactly where it will lead?
7. How do they help others imagine possibilities?
8. Do they tend to create programs themselves or cultivate ideas emerging from others?

---

21. Community

1. How does this person encounter a new community?
2. What do they tend to notice?
3. Who do they tend to seek out?
4. How do they build relationships outside the congregation?
5. What have you seen them learn from people unlike themselves?
6. How do they understand the relationship between church and place?
7. Can you tell me about a community relationship that became important to their ministry?

---

22. Stress

1. What happens when this person is under significant stress?
2. How does stress become visible?
3. What tends to trigger it?
4. How does stress affect their relationships?
5. What do they do when overwhelmed?
6. Do they ask for help?
7. What helps them regain perspective?
8. What should colleagues understand about working with them during stressful periods?
9. Have you seen their response to stress change over time?

---

23. Boundaries

1. What have you observed about this person's boundaries in ministry?
2. How do they manage availability?

3. How do they protect time away from ministry?
4. How do they handle confidentiality?
5. How do they respond to congregational expectations that may be unreasonable?
6. How do they maintain appropriate boundaries in pastoral relationships?
7. How do they balance commitment to ministry with the rest of their life?
8. Where might a congregation need to respect their boundaries particularly carefully?

Keep questions focused on ministry practice, not private family matters.

---

24. Self-Awareness

1. How accurately do you think this person understands their own gifts?
2. Where are they most self-aware?
3. Where might they have blind spots?
4. What do others sometimes see about them before they see it themselves?
5. What happens when a blind spot is pointed out?
6. What have they learned about themselves during the time you have known them?
7. What kind of people help them see themselves more clearly?

---

25. Growth Edges

Instead of:

"What are their weaknesses?"

consider:

1. Where do you think continued growth would serve this person well?
2. What parts of ministry require more intentional effort from them?
3. Where have you seen them need support?
4. What have they had to learn that did not come naturally?
5. What kind of coaching or feedback helps them?
6. What might a congregation need patience with while they continue growing?
7. What would you hope they learn in their next call?

---

26. Character and Integrity

1. What have you observed about this person's integrity?
2. Have you seen them make a difficult choice because they believed it was right?

3. How do they behave when no recognition is likely?
4. What happens when keeping a commitment becomes inconvenient?
5. How do they handle confidential information?
6. How do they respond when they have made a mistake that affects someone else?
7. Have you ever had reason to question their honesty or judgment?
8. What gives you confidence in their character?

If a significant concern emerges, use the process in **FM 9.4 — Reference Conversation Guide** rather than improvising an investigation.

---

27. Relationships

1. What kinds of relationships does this person build easily?
2. What relationships require more effort?
3. How do people tend to experience them over time?
4. Who tends to trust them?
5. With whom have they sometimes struggled?
6. How do they respond when someone does not like them?
7. How do they maintain relationships through disagreement?
8. What have you observed about their ability to repair relationships?

---

28. Personality Without Labeling

Instead of:

"Is she an introvert?"

ask:

"How does she tend to engage a room full of people she doesn't know?"

Instead of:

"Is he warm?"

ask:

"How do people experience him when they first meet him, and how does that change as they know him?"

Instead of:

"Is she confident?"

ask:

"What happens when she enters a situation in which she does not have expertise?"

Rather than asking references to label personality, ask them to describe behavior.

---

29. What People Misunderstand

1. What do people sometimes misunderstand about this person when they first meet?
2. What takes time to appreciate about them?
3. Is there something that can initially be interpreted negatively but makes more sense once someone knows them?
4. What do people discover about them after working together for a while?
5. What should we be careful not to misread?

This may be especially helpful after an interview weekend.

---

30. What Is Difficult About Working With Them?

Choose one:

What can sometimes be difficult about working with this person?

or:

If we worked with this person for several years, what would eventually frustrate us?

or:

What would their colleagues tell us we need to learn about working with them?

or:

What part of this person's leadership requires the most adjustment from others?

Then ask:

Can you give me an example?

A realistic answer is more useful than a disguised compliment.

---

31. What Environment Helps Them Flourish?

1. In what kind of congregation does this person seem likely to flourish?
2. What kind of leadership culture brings out their best?
3. What do they need from a session or governing board?
4. What do they need from staff?
5. What do they need from the congregation?
6. What kinds of expectations would make ministry difficult for them?
7. What organizational environment would frustrate them?
8. What kind of freedom do they need?
9. What kind of accountability helps them?

These questions turn reference work toward mutual discernment.

32. Questions About a Pattern You Have Already Noticed

Here reference conversations become especially useful.

Begin:

"We have noticed..."

Then ask for the reference's experience.

Examples:

"We have noticed that the candidate frequently tells stories in which they gather people before making decisions. Is that consistent with your experience?"

"We have noticed that community relationships seem to give the candidate considerable energy. What have you observed?"

"We have noticed that the candidate tends to ask questions before offering solutions. Is that something you have experienced?"

"We are trying to understand how the candidate responds when people resist their leadership. What have you seen?"

Follow with:

"Can you give me an example?"

33. Turning a Concern Into a Neutral Question

Do not disclose your conclusion in the question.

Instead of:

"We are concerned that she avoids conflict."

ask:

"When a difficult disagreement emerges, what have you seen her do?"

Instead of:

"We think he may be controlling."

ask:

"When he has a strong opinion and others disagree, what tends to happen?"

Instead of:

"She doesn't seem very pastoral."

ask:

"Tell me about a time you saw her providing care during a difficult situation."

Instead of:

"He seems defensive."

ask:

"What happens when someone gives him difficult feedback?"

Instead of:

"She seems reluctant to delegate."

ask:

"How does she decide what to do herself and what to entrust to others?"

Neutral questions produce more trustworthy information.

---

34. Questions for a Supervisor

If the reference supervised the candidate:

1. What responsibilities did the candidate hold?

2. Where did they require little supervision?
3. Where did they need more support?
4. How did they respond to supervision?
5. How did they receive performance feedback?
6. How dependable were they?
7. How did they manage competing responsibilities?
8. What happened when they disagreed with you?
9. Where did you see the greatest growth?
10. If you supervised them again, what would you do differently?
11. Would you choose to supervise or employ them again?
12. Why?

---

35. Questions for a Colleague

If the reference served alongside the candidate:

1. What was it like to share ministry with this person?
2. How did you divide responsibility?
3. How did they communicate with colleagues?
4. What happened when you disagreed?
5. How did they respond when you succeeded?
6. How did they respond when you made a mistake?
7. How did you experience their use of power?
8. What did you learn from them?
9. What sometimes frustrated you?
10. Would you choose to work with them again?
11. Why?

---

36. Questions for a Lay Leader

If the reference is a ruling elder, board member, or congregational leader:

1. What was it like to be led by this pastor?
2. How did they help laypeople exercise leadership?
3. What happened when the session disagreed with them?
4. How did they communicate difficult information?
5. How did they respond to criticism?
6. How did they help the congregation make difficult decisions?
7. What did they expect from lay leaders?
8. What did lay leaders need from them?
9. How did their leadership change the congregation?
10. What do you understand differently about ministry because you worked with them?

37. Questions for a Community Partner

If the candidate provides a community reference:

1. How did your relationship with the candidate begin?
2. What interested them in your work?
3. Did they come primarily to offer something or to learn?
4. How did they build trust?
5. How dependable were they?
6. How did they represent the congregation?
7. What happened when your organizations wanted different things?
8. What did they understand well about the community?
9. What did they have to learn?
10. What difference did the partnership make?
11. Would you work with them again?

---

38. Questions for Someone Who Has Known the Candidate a Long Time

1. How is this person different from when you first knew them?
2. Where have you seen the greatest growth?
3. What has become more important to them?
4. What have they had to unlearn?
5. How has their leadership changed?
6. How has their theology developed?
7. What difficult experiences have formed them?
8. What strengths have become more mature?
9. What growth edges remain?
10. What do you think they are ready for now that they may not have been ready for earlier?

---

39. Questions Near the End

Choose one or two.

1. What haven't I asked that I should have?
2. What should we understand about this person that might take us a year to discover?
3. What do you most hope their next congregation will appreciate about them?

4. What will their next congregation need to learn about them?
5. What do you hope their next call will offer them?
6. Is there anything you have been waiting for me to ask?
7. Is there anything you believe we need to know in order to discern responsibly?

Then allow silence.

---

40. The Partnership Questions

After briefly and honestly describing your congregation:

Where can you imagine this person's gifts connecting particularly well with our congregation and community?

Where might this partnership require particular attention?

What might we need to learn in order to work well with this person?

Do not ask the reference to decide whether the candidate should be called.

---

41. Two Useful Closing Questions

When appropriate:

If circumstances were right, would you choose to work with this person again? Why or why not?

and:

Would you trust this person with significant pastoral and leadership responsibility? What leads you to that answer?

Listen carefully to the explanation.

---

42. Follow-Up Questions

Often the best reference question is not on this list; it is the question that follows the answer.

Keep these nearby:

Can you tell me a story about that?

Can you give me an example?

What did they do?

What happened next?

How did other people respond?

How did the candidate respond?

What changed afterward?

What did they learn?

Has that happened more than once?

Was that something you observed personally?

What do you make of that?

Help me understand what you mean.

Do not become so committed to prepared questions that you stop listening.

---

43. A Six-Question Reference Conversation

When time is limited, these six questions can produce a useful conversation.

1.

When you think about this person's ministry, what story comes to mind first?

2.

Tell me about a time you saw this person lead something difficult. What did they actually do?

3.

Tell me about a time this person was wrong or something they attempted did not work. What happened next?

4.

What can sometimes be difficult about working with this person?

5.

We have been noticing _____. Is that consistent with your experience? Can you give me an example?

6.

What have I not asked that you think we should understand before discerning a call?

Then follow the stories.

---

44. A Ten-Question Reference Conversation

For a fuller conversation:

1. **How do you know the candidate, and in what contexts have you worked together?**
2. **When you think about their ministry, what story comes to mind first?**
3. **What kinds of ministry seem to give them energy?**
4. **Tell me about a time you watched them lead something difficult.**
5. **What happens when someone strongly disagrees with them?**
6. **Tell me about a time they were wrong or something failed. What happened afterward?**

7. **What can sometimes be difficult about working with them?**
8. **Where have you seen them grow, and where would continued growth serve them well?**
9. **We have been noticing _____. What have you observed?**
10. **What should we understand about this person that we have not yet asked?**

That is enough. A good reference conversation is not measured by the number of questions completed.

---

45. Questions Usually Not Worth Asking

Avoid generic questions that invite predictable answers:

Is the candidate a good pastor?

Is the candidate a good preacher?

Does the candidate like people?

Is the candidate a strong leader?

Is the candidate spiritual?

Does the candidate work hard?

Would you recommend the candidate?

What are the candidate's strengths and weaknesses?

These questions are not necessarily wrong; they simply tend to produce adjectives instead of evidence.

If you use one, follow immediately with:

"Tell me about an experience that leads you to say that."

---

46. Questions Not to Ask

Do not ask questions about private matters unrelated to ministry or protected personal information.

Do not ask references to speculate about:

1. health
2. disability
3. age
4. marital plans
5. pregnancy or family plans
6. sexual orientation
7. private family relationships
8. other matters unrelated to the candidate's capacity to fulfill the responsibilities of the call

Do not use reference conversations to obtain information you would not appropriately ask the candidate.

---

47. Building Your Reference Conversation

Before each call, choose:

One opening story question

Two questions about patterns we want to understand

1. _____

2. _____

One question about a significant gift

One question about a concern or uncertainty

One question about learning, failure, or feedback

One question about working with the candidate

One closing question

That is probably enough.

---

48. After Choosing the Questions

Look at your list.

Ask:

Are we asking for stories?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we asking about things this reference has actually observed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are any questions leading the reference toward the answer we expect?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we trying to confirm an opinion rather than explore a pattern?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have we included something we genuinely do not know?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have we left enough room to follow the conversation?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If the list contains fifteen questions, reduce it.

Leader's Note

A reference question bank can easily become a checklist. Do not let that happen.

The purpose is not to help you ask forty-seven questions, but to find the right six or eight for this reference, this candidate, and this point in discernment.

By now, you already know something. Use it.

If you have noticed that the candidate repeatedly describes ministry as collaborative, explore collaboration.

If the candidate becomes animated whenever the conversation turns toward community, ask someone who has watched them work beyond the congregation.

If you remain uncertain about how they respond to resistance, ask a reference who has actually disagreed with them.

If you think you have discovered an extraordinary gift, test that pattern too.

And whenever a reference tells you:

"She's a wonderful leader."

do not write **wonderful leader** in your notes and move to the next question.

Ask:

"Can you tell me a story?"

That story is the reference. The adjective is only the introduction.

FM 9.6

Ethical Reference Practices

Purpose

Reference conversations involve trust.

The candidate has entrusted the Search Committee with names of people who know their ministry. References have agreed to speak about another person. The congregation has entrusted the committee with confidential discernment.

That trust creates responsibilities.

Reference work should help the committee understand a candidate more fully, never become a quiet investigation conducted behind the candidate's back.

The basic ethical principle is simple:

Do not seek information about a candidate in ways you would be unwilling to describe to the candidate.

Good reference practices protect the candidate, the reference, the congregation, and the integrity of the search.

Use this resource with **FM 9.4 — Reference Conversation Guide** and **FM 9.5 — Suggested Reference Questions**.

---

1. The Candidate Is a Person, Not a Case File

Search Committees naturally want as much information as possible before making an important decision.

More information is not always better information.

A candidate does not surrender the right to privacy by entering a search.

The committee's task is to learn what is reasonably necessary to discern the candidate's capacity and suitability for this particular call.

Ask:

Do we need this information to discern the call?

not:

Would we like to know this?

Curiosity alone is not sufficient reason to inquire.

---

2. Begin With Permission

Before contacting references:

☐ Candidate has provided the reference

☐ Candidate has given permission for contact

☐ Committee knows who is authorized to make contact

☐ Denominational procedures have been reviewed

☐ Appropriate stage of the search has been reached

☐ Candidate understands that references are being contacted

If any are unclear, stop and clarify before proceeding.

---

3. Listed References Are Not Permission to Contact Everyone

A candidate may provide:

- supervisors
- colleagues
- congregational leaders
- community partners
- denominational leaders

Those people are references. Their names do not create permission to contact others associated with the candidate.

For example:

"Her reference mentioned another elder who worked closely with her. Let's call him too."

Not without permission.

The ethical boundary remains:

The candidate should know who is being contacted about their candidacy.

---

4. Back-Channel References

A back-channel reference is someone the committee contacts about the candidate without the candidate's knowledge or permission.

Examples include:

"My friend knows someone at his current church."

"Our former pastor knows her executive presbyter."

"Let's call someone from his previous congregation."

"I know a pastor in that presbytery. I'll ask around."

Do not do this.

Back-channel reference gathering creates several problems:

- the candidate cannot know who is being consulted
- the source may not know the candidate well
- rumor can become evidence
- confidentiality may be compromised
- the candidate's current ministry may be placed at risk
- the committee may receive information without context
- personal conflicts may be invisible to the committee

If you believe another person's perspective would be important, ask the candidate for permission to contact them.

---

5. The “I Know Someone” Problem

Search Committee members often have extensive church networks.

That can be helpful, but it can also become dangerous.

A committee member may say:

“I know someone who served with her. I could just give them a call.”

The word just should make the committee pause.

Ask:

Is this person an authorized reference?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the candidate know we intend to contact them?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Has the candidate given permission?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If the answers are no, do not make the call.

Personal networks do not suspend ethical boundaries.

---

6. If You Want Another Reference

There may be legitimate reasons to request another reference.

Perhaps you need someone who has observed:

☐ Staff supervision

☐ Governing-board relationships

☐ Conflict

☐ Community engagement

☐ Preaching over time

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Financial leadership

☐ Other: _____

Ask the candidate:

"We would like to understand more about your experience supervising staff. Would you be willing to provide someone who has worked with you closely in that context?"

This gives the candidate knowledge and agency while allowing the committee to gather useful information.

---

7. When the Committee Wants to Contact a Specific Person

Sometimes the committee may have a legitimate reason to speak with someone specific.

Do not contact that person first.

Tell the candidate:

Person:

Why we believe this conversation would help:

Candidate response:

☐ Permission given

☐ Permission declined

☐ Candidate suggested another person

If permission is declined, become curious before becoming suspicious.

Ask the candidate why.

There may be a reasonable explanation.

---

8. A Candidate's “No” Is Information, Not Proof

Suppose a candidate does not want you contacting someone.

Do not conclude:

“They must be hiding something.”

Ask:

“Can you help us understand your concern?”

Perhaps:

- the current congregation does not know the candidate is searching
- the relationship was complicated
- the person has a history of violating confidentiality
- there is an unresolved personnel matter
- the candidate believes someone else could speak more directly to the question

Listen to the explanation, then discern what you need.

A boundary is not evidence of wrongdoing.

---

9. Protect the Candidate's Current Ministry

A pastoral search may be confidential, and careless reference contact can expose it.

Before contacting anyone, ask:

Could this conversation reveal the candidate's search to someone who should not know?

This is particularly important when contacting people connected with the candidate's current:

- congregation
- staff
- governing board
- presbytery or judicatory
- community partnerships

Never assume that “everybody probably knows.”

---

10. Protect the Reference Too

References are also entrusting information to the committee.

At the beginning of the conversation, explain:

22. who you are
23. why you are calling
24. how their name was obtained
25. the purpose of the conversation
26. who within the search process will receive their comments

Do not promise confidentiality you cannot provide.

What can we accurately tell the reference about how their information will be handled?

Know the answer before calling.

---

11. Do Not Promise “Off the Record”

A reference may say:

“Can I tell you something off the record?”

Be cautious.

If information may influence the committee's discernment, it cannot meaningfully be both consequential and nonexistent.

A useful response is:

“Before you continue, I don't want to promise confidentiality beyond what our process allows. If what you tell me is relevant to our discernment, I may need to share it with the committee.”

Let the reference decide whether to continue.

---

12. Distinguish Confidentiality From Secrecy

Confidentiality means information is shared only with people who appropriately need it.

Secrecy means information is hidden in ways that prevent responsible discernment.

The committee should know:

Who has access to reference notes?

Where are they stored?

Who may discuss them?

How long are they retained?

What happens to them when the search ends?

Follow denominational and congregational requirements governing records.

---

13. Ask Only What Is Relevant to Ministry

Reference conversations are not invitations into every part of a candidate's life.

Before asking a question, consider:

How does this relate to the responsibilities of the call we are discerning?

Appropriate subjects may include:

29. leadership
30. pastoral care
31. preaching
32. theology
33. relationships
34. staff supervision
35. conflict
36. judgment
37. boundaries
38. reliability
39. integrity
40. learning
41. mission
42. use of authority

Private curiosity is not a ministry qualification.

---

14. Stay Away From Protected and Private Information

Do not use reference conversations to seek information about matters such as:

17. age
18. disability
19. medical history
20. pregnancy
21. plans to have children
22. marital circumstances
23. sexual orientation
24. private family relationships
25. other protected or irrelevant personal information

Do not ask a reference questions you would not appropriately ask the candidate.

When employment law, denominational requirements, or safeguarding procedures apply, follow the appropriate formal process rather than improvising.

---

15. Family Members Are Not References to the Candidate's Suitability

Do not evaluate:

21. spouse
22. partner
23. children
24. family structure

Do not ask:

"How involved is the spouse in church?"

"Will the spouse participate?"

"Are the children well behaved?"

"How does the family feel about moving?"

The congregation is discerning a call with the candidate.

The candidate's family is not being called as unpaid staff.

---

16. Social Media Is Not a Reference Check

Public information may be easy to find, but not every available piece belongs in the discernment process.

Before searching a candidate online, the committee should have an agreed policy consistent with denominational procedures and applicable requirements.

Avoid amateur investigation of:

17. family members
18. old social-media conversations
19. photographs
20. personal associations
21. political or social activity unrelated to ministry requirements
22. fragments of online discussion without context

If online review is part of the approved search process, apply the same process consistently to candidates.

Do not allow individual committee members to conduct private investigations.

---

17. Google Is Not Discernment

Searching a candidate's name can produce:

3. outdated information
4. another person with the same name
5. incomplete stories
6. anonymous comments
7. old congregational disputes
8. social-media fragments
9. information stripped of context

If something relevant and credible emerges through an appropriate process, investigate responsibly.

Do not treat search-engine results as established fact.

---

18. Rumor Is Not Evidence

A committee member may hear:

"Someone told me that..."

Pause.

Ask:

Who actually experienced this?

Is the information firsthand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is the source willing and appropriate to speak with the committee?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the candidate know we are seeking this information?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do not allow anonymous church-network stories to become part of the candidate's record.

Church systems can preserve stories long after their context has disappeared.

---

19. Firsthand Matters

During a reference conversation, if someone says:

"People thought..."

ask:

"What did you personally experience?"

If:

"I heard that..."

ask:

"Were you directly involved?"

If not, note that clearly.

Information:

Firsthand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Source of secondhand information:

Secondhand information may indicate a question worth exploring. It should not silently become fact.

---

20. Separate Observation From Interpretation

Apply **FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions** to references too.

Reference says:

"He was controlling."

Ask:

"Can you describe something you experienced that led you to that conclusion?"

Record separately:

Observation described:

Reference's interpretation:

Our interpretation:

Those are three different things.

---

21. Context Matters

Suppose a reference tells you:

"She had terrible relationships with the session."

Ask:

"Help me understand what was happening."

Perhaps the congregation was experiencing:

10. severe financial stress
11. misconduct
12. staff conflict
13. a building crisis
14. denominational division
15. major leadership transition

Context does not excuse harmful behavior, but behavior cannot be understood responsibly without it.

---

22. One Difficult Relationship Is Still One Relationship

A candidate may have had a difficult relationship with:

16. a supervisor
17. a colleague
18. a clerk of session
19. a staff member
20. a congregation

That matters, but it is not necessarily the whole story.

Ask:

Is this part of a larger pattern?

Look across:

21. candidate stories
22. interviews
23. other references
24. observed behavior
25. the circumstances of the relationship

One person's experience deserves attention without automatically becoming the definitive interpretation of another.

---

23. Positive References Require Discernment Too

Ethical reference work is not only about protecting candidates from negative information.

Positive claims also need context.

Reference says:

"Everybody loved her."

Ask:

"What did people particularly value?"

Reference says:

"He's the best pastor we've ever had."

Ask:

"What did he do that made such a difference?"

Reference says:

"She's an extraordinary leader."

Ask:

"Can you tell me about a time you experienced that?"

Enthusiasm is welcome; stories make it useful.

---

24. Do Not Ask References to Diagnose

Avoid questions such as:

"Do you think the candidate is narcissistic?"

"Do you think she has emotional problems?"

"Is he psychologically healthy?"

References are not there to diagnose candidates.

Ask about observable behavior:

"What happens when the candidate receives criticism?"

"How does the candidate respond when others receive credit?"

"What have you observed when the candidate is under stress?"

Stay with experience.

---

25. Do Not Invite Character Assassination

If a reference becomes highly negative, remain calm.

Ask for specifics.

"Can you describe what happened?"

"Were you directly involved?"

"When did this occur?"

"What happened afterward?"

"Was the issue addressed?"

Do not join the reference in speculation or disparagement.

The committee is gathering information, not participating in a grievance.

---

26. Serious Concerns Require Serious Process

Sometimes a reference may raise information involving:

26. misconduct
27. abuse
28. boundary violations
29. financial impropriety
30. dishonesty
31. safeguarding concerns
32. other serious ethical matters

Do not investigate these casually through additional informal phone calls.

Pause and document what was actually said.

Determine what denominational, legal, safeguarding, or personnel procedures apply.

Seek appropriate presbytery or other authorized guidance.

A Search Committee should not become an investigative body for matters requiring formal process.

---

27. Do Not Promise the Candidate Absolute Confidentiality Either

There may be information the committee is required to communicate through appropriate channels.

The committee should never promise:

"Whatever you tell us stays entirely within this room."

when denominational policy, safeguarding obligations, or law may require otherwise.

Use accurate language about confidentiality.

---

28. Give the Candidate an Opportunity to Respond

Suppose a reference raises a significant concern that could materially affect the committee's discernment.

Before reaching a conclusion, ask:

Does fairness require that the candidate have an opportunity to address this?

Usually, if the information is consequential and can appropriately be discussed, the answer will be yes.

Concern:

Source:

Firsthand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Significant to discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Candidate response needed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Appropriate way to raise it:

Do not conduct a trial. Invite clarification.

---

29. Ask Without Revealing More Than Necessary

Protect the reference while allowing the candidate to respond.

Rather than:

"John Smith told us you were impossible to work with."

ask, where appropriate:

"We have heard a concern about how a particular staff disagreement developed. We would like to understand that period from your perspective."

Provide enough information for a meaningful response without unnecessarily exposing confidential details.

If formal procedures require a different approach, follow them.

---

30. Listen to the Candidate's Response the Same Way

Do not ask merely to see whether the candidate can explain away the concern.

Listen for:

33. context
34. responsibility
35. self-awareness
36. learning
37. consistency
38. defensiveness
39. repair
40. what remains unresolved

What did the candidate say happened?

What responsibility did they name?

What did they learn?

What remains unclear?

---

31. Do Not Demand Perfection

Every experienced pastor has:

41. made mistakes
42. disappointed people
43. had difficult relationships
44. led something that failed
45. misunderstood someone
46. been misunderstood
47. made decisions someone still dislikes

A spotless reference history may mean only that the questions were shallow.

The ethical question is not:

Has anything difficult ever happened?

It is:

What do the candidate's patterns of responsibility, learning, integrity, and relationship reveal?

---

32. Consider the Source's Relationship to the Candidate

Every reference sees from somewhere.

Ask:

Reference was:

☐ Supervisor

☐ Colleague

☐ Staff member

☐ Governing-board member

☐ Congregational member

☐ Community partner

☐ Denominational leader

☐ Other: _____

Their position affects what they could observe.

A supervisor may know something a congregational member does not.

A staff member may experience leadership differently from a community partner.

None automatically possesses the whole truth.

---

33. Power Works Both Ways

Consider power relationships within references.

A former supervisor may have evaluated the candidate.

A former staff member may have been supervised by the candidate.

A congregational leader may have been involved in a difficult decision.

Ask:

What was the relationship between these people?

What power did each hold?

What interests might have been involved?

This is not an invitation to dismiss testimony, but to understand context.

---

34. Avoid Confirmation Bias

If the committee loves the candidate, it may explain away concerns.

If the committee already has doubts, it may magnify them.

Before discussing reference information, ask:

Were we hoping this reference would confirm something?

Did it?

Are we giving information more or less weight because of our existing opinion?

What would we think if the same information concerned another candidate?

Apply the same discipline to good news and difficult news.

---

35. Use Consistent Standards

Candidates should not receive dramatically different levels of scrutiny because one committee member happens to have connections in a particular presbytery.

Ask:

Are we following the same reference process for candidates at comparable stages?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we asking comparable categories of questions?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we applying the same confidentiality standards?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we pursuing additional information according to an agreed process?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Consistency is part of fairness.

---

36. Reference Notes Should Be Factual

Avoid writing:

"Candidate is controlling."

Write:

"Reference described two staff decisions in which candidate made the final decision without consulting staff; reference interpreted this as controlling."

Avoid:

"Excellent pastor."

Write:

"Reference described candidate organizing congregational care teams and personally following up after hospitalizations."

Good notes preserve the distinction between what happened and what someone thinks it means.

---

37. Do Not Circulate Raw Notes Unnecessarily

Reference notes can contain sensitive information.

Determine in advance:

48. who needs full notes
49. whether a summary is sufficient
50. where notes are stored
51. whether electronic copies are appropriate
52. when records should be destroyed or transferred according to policy

Do not leave reference notes:

53. on shared printers
54. in public meeting rooms
55. in unsecured email threads
56. in personal cloud folders accessible to others

Treat them as confidential search records.

---

38. Committee Conversation About References

When the committee gathers, begin with:

What did the references help us understand?

Not:

Did the candidate pass the references?

Record:

Patterns reinforced:

Patterns complicated:

New information:

Concerns requiring attention:

Questions requiring candidate follow-up:

39. Do Not Vote on References

Avoid:

Three references were excellent and one was negative.

Reference conversations are not ballots.

Ask instead:

What experience does each reference bring?

How specific is the evidence?

Is it firsthand?

Does it connect with patterns elsewhere?

What context matters?

One credible observation can be significant; ten vague compliments may add very little.

40. When References Disagree

This is normal.

Reference A:

Reference B:

Ask:

Did they know the candidate in different settings?

At different times?

From different roles?

Could both experiences be true?

Does the difference reveal something important?

Do not force references into artificial agreement.

41. When a Reference Raises Something New

Ask:

Is this information relevant?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Firsthand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Specific?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Consistent with other evidence?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unknown

Significant enough to pursue?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

Appropriate next step:

Do not immediately widen the investigation.

42. When the Information Is Old

People change.

If a concern occurred years ago, ask:

What has happened since?

Event occurred:

Approximately how long ago?

Candidate's role then:

Evidence of learning or change since:

Past behavior matters. So does formation.

---

43. When the Candidate Left Under Difficult Circumstances

Do not assume either:

The candidate must have been the problem.

or:

The congregation must have been the problem.

Pastoral relationships can end painfully for many reasons.

Ask carefully:

57. What happened?
58. What was the candidate's responsibility?

59. What was happening in the congregation?
60. What did the candidate learn?
61. What do appropriate references say?
62. What patterns appear elsewhere?

Resist the desire for a simple villain.

---

44. When a Candidate Has Experienced Conflict

Conflict itself is not disqualifying; long ministry without conflict may be impossible.

Ask:

How does the candidate behave within conflict?

How do they understand their own contribution?

What happens afterward?

What have they learned?

Do similar patterns appear repeatedly?

The presence of conflict tells you little; the pattern within it may tell you much.

---

45. When the Candidate Has Been Hurt

References may describe circumstances in which the candidate experienced mistreatment.

Do not turn another person's injury into a curiosity exercise.

Ask only what is needed to understand:

63. ministry implications
64. current capacity
65. learning
66. appropriate boundaries
67. patterns relevant to the call

The candidate owns their story.

---

46. Reference Ethics Checklist

Before Contact

☐ Candidate permission confirmed

☐ Reference authorized

☐ Denominational procedures reviewed

☐ Confidentiality protected

☐ Purpose of conversation identified

☐ Questions relevant to ministry

☐ No back-channel contact planned

During Conversation

☐ Relationship established

☐ Reference knows purpose of call

☐ No false confidentiality promised

☐ Firsthand experience distinguished from hearsay

☐ Specific examples requested

☐ Protected/private information avoided

☐ Reference not invited to diagnose

☐ Notes distinguish observation from interpretation

After Conversation

☐ Notes secured

☐ Information shared only appropriately

☐ Significant concerns evaluated in context

☐ Candidate response considered where appropriate

☐ Patterns compared across the search

☐ Rumor not treated as evidence

☐ Further contacts require appropriate permission

---

47. The Transparency Test

Before taking an action involving references, ask:

Would we be comfortable telling the candidate exactly what we are doing?

Action we are considering:

Would we tell the candidate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

Why not?

That answer deserves serious attention.

---

48. The Relevance Test

Ask:

Does this information genuinely help us discern the candidate's capacity for this call?

If not, do not pursue it.

---

49. The Fairness Test

Ask:

If this information could materially affect our decision, has the candidate had a fair opportunity to respond when appropriate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

What needs to happen?

---

50. The Pattern Test

Ask:

Is this information part of a pattern—or are we allowing one person's interpretation to become the candidate's identity?

Then return to **FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search**.

---

51. The Golden Rule of Reference Work

Imagine that someday you are the candidate.

People you do not know are discussing your:

68. leadership
69. mistakes
70. relationships
71. judgment
72. growth
73. difficult seasons
74. gifts
75. failures

How would you hope they would do it?

With accuracy.

With context.

With appropriate confidentiality.

With curiosity rather than suspicion.

With enough humility to recognize that no single person possesses the whole story.

Offer candidates the same.

---

52. When the Reference Process Is Complete

Ask together:

Did we seek what we genuinely needed to know?

Did we respect the candidate's privacy?

Did we avoid rumor and back-channel investigation?

Did we treat references fairly?

Did we give difficult information appropriate context?

Did we allow the candidate to respond when fairness required it?

Did reference information deepen rather than replace our discernment?

If you can answer yes, the reference process has served its purpose.

Leader's Note

Pastoral ministry takes place in a remarkably interconnected world.

Someone knows someone.

A committee member knows a pastor in the candidate's presbytery. A former colleague knows someone from the candidate's previous church. A friend knows a staff member.

Information is easy to obtain. That does not mean it is ours to obtain.

The temptation is understandable. Calling a pastor is important. The committee wants to be careful. Someone says:

"Wouldn't it be irresponsible not to find out everything we can?"

No. Responsible discernment does not mean knowing everything.

It means knowing what you need to know **in ways worthy of the trust people have placed in you.**

There is another reason ethical reference practice matters.

Pastoral ministry is complicated.

People disappoint one another.

Congregations divide.

Staff relationships become difficult.

Pastors make mistakes.

People grow.

Sometimes they do not.

A phone call made quietly through a church network can turn one person's experience into a candidate's permanent identity before the candidate even knows the conversation occurred.

That is not careful discernment; it is unaccountable power.

Use references well.

Ask permission.

Ask for stories.

Distinguish firsthand experience from rumor.

Protect confidentiality.

Take concerns seriously without turning them into verdicts.

Give candidates an appropriate opportunity to respond to consequential information.

And remember:

The ethical question is not simply whether the information is true. It is whether it is ours to seek, ours to use, and ours to share.

How a Search Committee treats a candidate while discerning a call is already part of the ministry it is preparing to share.

FM 9.7

Remaining Questions Worksheet

Purpose

Near the end of a search, there will almost always be unanswered questions.

That does not necessarily mean the committee needs another interview.

Some questions matter; some are simply interesting.

Some arise because new information has revealed something that genuinely needs clarification.

Some arise because making a decision is frightening and one more question feels safer than deciding.

This worksheet helps the committee distinguish among them.

The goal is not to know everything about a candidate before discerning a call. You cannot.

The goal is to determine:

What do we still need to understand in order to discern faithfully?

Use this worksheet after **FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search** and the reference process in **FM 9.4–9.6**.

---

1. Begin With What We Already Know

Before identifying unanswered questions, name what has become reasonably clear.

About the candidate's leadership:

About their pastoral ministry:

About their theology:

About their approach to mission:

About their relationships with others:

About their capacity to learn and grow:

About the possible partnership between candidate and congregation:

Do not allow unanswered questions to obscure what you have already learned.

2. What Is Still Unclear?

Individually, complete:

Something I still do not understand about this candidate is…

Something I still do not understand about how this candidate might serve here is…

Something I still do not understand about the possible partnership is…

Do not answer them yet. Gather them.

3. Gather the Committee's Questions

Go around the table.

Each person names remaining questions without discussion.

Question 1

Question 2

Question 3

Question 4

Question 5

Question 6

Question 7

Question 8

Now look at the list before trying to answer anything.

4. Is It Really a Question?

Some questions are opinions disguised as questions.

For example:

"Will she be able to handle our strong personalities?"

may mean:

"I am not convinced she is assertive enough."

Or:

"Will he be able to connect with younger families?"

may mean:

"I expected him to be more energetic."

Take one remaining question.

Question:

_____

_____

Is there an opinion underneath it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, the opinion may be:

_____

_____

What observations led to it?

_____

_____

Return to **FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions** when necessary.

5. Why Do We Need to Know?

For each remaining question, ask:

Why does the answer matter?

Question:

It matters because:

It relates directly to:

☐ Responsibilities of the call

☐ A significant congregational need

☐ An emerging pattern

☐ A significant concern

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Staff relationships

☐ Mission

☐ Conflict/differences

☐ Terms of Call

☐ Something else: _____

If you cannot explain why the answer matters, reconsider whether it needs to be asked.

6. Need to Know or Want to Know?

Question:

Ask:

Do we need this information to discern the call—or would we simply like to know?

☐ Need to know

☐ Helpful to know

☐ Interesting but unnecessary

☐ Not appropriate to ask

Why?

Not every unanswered question needs an answer.

7. Have We Already Asked It?

Sometimes the committee keeps asking because it did not receive the answer it hoped for.

Question:

Have we already asked something similar?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What did the candidate say?

Why does the answer feel insufficient?

Do we need clarification?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Or are we hoping for a different answer?

☐ Yes

☐ No

That distinction matters.

---

8. Do We Already Have the Answer Somewhere Else?

Before asking again, review:

☐ Candidate materials

☐ First interview notes

☐ Second interview notes

☐ Scenario conversations

☐ Theology conversations

☐ Candidate questions

☐ Interview weekend observations

☐ Reference conversations

☐ Other: _____

Question:

Information we already have:

Is another question still necessary?

☐ Yes

☐ No

---

9. Is This About a Pattern?

Remaining question:

Does it arise from:

☐ One isolated moment

☐ Several observations

☐ A pattern across the search

☐ A reference conversation

☐ An inconsistency

☐ Something we expected but never encountered

☐ A committee member's intuition

☐ Other: _____

Evidence:

How significant is it?

☐ High

☐ Moderate

☐ Low

---

10. Is It a Question About Difference?

Sometimes a remaining question arises because the candidate is different from what the committee expected.

Question:

Difference involved:

Is this difference primarily about:

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership style

☐ Personality

☐ Generation

☐ Communication

☐ Worship

☐ Experience

☐ Culture

☐ Preference

☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

Does this difference actually affect the candidate's capacity to serve faithfully here?

If yes, explore it. If not, perhaps the committee needs to live with difference rather than eliminate it.

---

11. Is It a Question About Risk?

Some questions are attempts to predict the future.

For example:

Will the church grow?

Will everyone like the candidate?

Will conflict develop?

Will the candidate stay ten years?

Will giving increase?

These questions cannot be answered reliably.

Our question:

_____

Are we asking the candidate to predict something neither they nor we can know?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What can we reasonably ask instead?

_____

_____

For example, instead of:

"Will you grow our church?"

ask:

"How have you helped congregations become more deeply engaged with their communities?"

Move from prediction to experience.

---

12. Is It Really Our Question?

Sometimes committees want candidates to answer questions that belong to the congregation.

Question:

Are we asking the candidate to solve:

☐ Congregational decline

☐ Financial problems

☐ Old conflict

☐ Lack of volunteers

☐ Weak mission engagement

☐ Staff issues

☐ Aging membership

☐ Anxiety about the future

☐ Other: _____

Ask:

Does this question belong to the candidate—or to us?

A pastor may help lead the congregation through these realities, but cannot carry them for the congregation.

13. Is the Question Fair?

Before asking:

Does the question relate to the call?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Would we ask another candidate the same kind of question?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does it respect appropriate personal boundaries?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does it ask the candidate to disclose something unnecessarily private?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is it permitted within our denominational and search procedures?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If the question is not appropriate, remove it.

14. Is the Question Answerable?

Ask:

Could the candidate reasonably know the answer?

Question:

Answerable now?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Partly

If partly:

What part can reasonably be explored?

Do not demand certainty where none is possible.

---

15. Is It a Question for the Candidate?

Not every remaining question belongs to the candidate.

Question:

Best source:

☐ Candidate

☐ Reference

☐ Presbytery/judicatory

☐ Session/governing body

☐ Search Committee

☐ Personnel committee

☐ Congregational records

☐ Terms of Call discussion

☐ Other: _____

Ask the person who can actually answer.

---

16. Questions Raised by References

After completing reference conversations:

Reference raised:

Is the information:

☐ Firsthand

☐ Secondhand

☐ Unclear

Does it connect with an existing pattern?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is it significant to discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does fairness require candidate response?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Question for candidate:

Use **FM 9.6 — Ethical Reference Practices** when reference information is consequential.

---

17. Questions Raised by Inconsistency

Sometimes two pieces of information do not seem to fit.

We heard:

Elsewhere we heard or observed:

The apparent inconsistency is:

Could both be true?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

What context might explain the difference?

Question:

Ask for understanding, not confession.

---

18. Questions Raised by Silence

Something important may never have emerged.

We have heard very little about:

Is this important to the call?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have we actually given the candidate an opportunity to address it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Question:

Absence of information is not evidence of absence. Ask before assuming.

---

19. Questions Raised by Enthusiasm

Strong enthusiasm deserves examination too.

We are particularly excited about:

What observations support that enthusiasm?

What are we assuming?

Is there anything we still need to understand?

Do not scrutinize concerns while leaving enthusiasm unexamined.

20. Questions Raised by Concern

Our concern:

What have we observed?

Where else has it appeared?

What do references add?

What do we still need to understand?

Best question:

---

21. Questions Raised by Intuition

A committee member may say:

"Something still doesn't feel settled for me."

Do not dismiss that, but do not treat it as a conclusion either.

Ask:

What feels unsettled?

When did that feeling begin?

What was happening?

What observations might be underneath it?

Is there a question we can ask?

Or is this uncertainty we may simply need to hold?

22. Questions About Theology

Is there something we still need to understand about:

☐ Scripture

☐ Grace

☐ Jesus Christ

☐ Church

☐ Sacraments

☐ Mission

☐ Justice

☐ Evangelism

☐ Human difference

☐ Reformed tradition

☐ Wider church

☐ Other: _____

What remains unclear?

Why does it matter for ministry together?

Question:

Do not conduct a theological examination merely because you can. Ask what genuinely matters to shared ministry.

---

23. Questions About Leadership

What remains unclear about how the candidate:

☐ Makes decisions

☐ Shares leadership

☐ Exercises authority

☐ Supervises staff

☐ Handles resistance

☐ Develops leaders

☐ Communicates

☐ Leads change

☐ Responds to failure

☐ Other: _____

Question:

Can we ask for a story rather than a hypothetical answer?

---

24. Questions About Pastoral Care

What remains unclear?

Does it involve:

☐ Availability

☐ Boundaries

☐ Crisis care

☐ Hospital visitation

☐ Congregational caregiving

☐ Referral

☐ Confidentiality

☐ Expectations

☐ Other: _____

Question:

25. Questions About Staff

What remains unclear?

Question:

Do we have the right person asking it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Should this be part of:

☐ Candidate conversation

☐ Staff conversation

☐ Reference conversation

☐ Terms of Call

☐ Later onboarding

Not everything needs to be resolved during selection.

---

26. Questions About Mission and Community

What remains unclear about how the candidate understands:

☐ Mission

☐ Community

☐ Partnerships

☐ Evangelism

☐ Justice

☐ Congregational vocation

☐ Community needs/assets

☐ Other: _____

Question:

Could a story question reveal more?

27. Questions About Differences

Difference we have identified:

What do we need to understand?

What do we merely need to accept?

Question, if one is needed:

The purpose of another conversation is not to make the candidate more like us.

28. Questions About Expectations

Candidate may expect:

Congregation may expect:

Possible mismatch:

What needs clarification before a call?

Question:

Unspoken expectations become future disappointments. This is worth clarifying.

29. Questions About Terms of Call

Before moving forward, identify practical matters that genuinely require clarity.

Remaining question about:

☐ Compensation

☐ Housing

☐ Benefits

☐ Vacation

☐ Study leave

☐ Moving expenses

☐ Start date

☐ Sabbatical provisions

☐ Professional expenses

☐ Other: _____

Question:

_____

_____

Who should address it?

Do not mix every Terms of Call negotiation into spiritual discernment, but do not pretend practical realities are spiritually irrelevant.

30. Questions About Beginning Ministry Together

Some questions may not determine whether the candidate should be called but may matter greatly if the call proceeds.

Question:

_____

Must be answered before call?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Could be addressed during transition/onboarding?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Could become an early covenant conversation?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Save for later:

This distinction can significantly shorten the remaining-question list.

31. Sort the Questions

Place each remaining question into one category.

A — Must Know Before Proceeding

B — Important, but Could Be Addressed During Final Conversations

C — Important for Beginning Ministry Together

D — Interesting but Not Necessary

E — Cannot Be Known Yet

F — Not Appropriate to Ask

This is one of the most important exercises in the worksheet.

32. The Must-Know Test

For every question in Category A, complete:

Question:

Why must we know?

What decision depends on the answer?

Who can answer?

How will we ask?

When?

If you cannot answer these questions, reconsider whether it belongs in Category A.

33. Turn Judgments Into Questions

Judgment:

"The candidate may not be collaborative enough."

Question:

"Tell us about a significant decision in which you strongly preferred one direction but others preferred another. How was the decision made?"

Now create your own.

Our judgment or concern:

_____

_____

Story question:

_____

_____

_____

34. Turn Predictions Into Experience

Prediction:

"Will you be able to lead us through change?"

Better:

"Tell us about a significant change you helped lead when some people did not want the change. What did you do?"

Prediction we are tempted to ask:

_____

_____

Experience question:

Ask candidates what they have learned through experience rather than requiring promises about an unknowable future.

---

35. Turn Labels Into Behavior

Label:

"Are you a strong leader?"

Better:

"When an important decision must be made and the group cannot reach consensus, what have you done?"

Label we are using:

Behavioral question:

---

36. Build the Final Questions

For each question that remains necessary:

What we need to understand:

Best question:

Possible follow-up:

Who should ask it?

Best setting:

☐ Phone

☐ Video

☐ In person

☐ Email

☐ Terms of Call conversation

☐ Other: _____

---

37. Keep the Final Conversation Focused

If you have identified twelve remaining questions, stop.

Ask:

Do we really have twelve unresolved issues—or are we avoiding a decision?

Reduce the list.

Our three most important remaining questions:

1.

2.

3.

Three thoughtful questions may accomplish more than another two-hour interview.

38. After the Candidate Responds

Do not immediately evaluate.

Record:

What did the candidate actually say?

What story or example did they provide?

What did we learn?

Did the answer:

☐ Clarify

☐ Reinforce an existing pattern

☐ Complicate an existing pattern

☐ Raise a new significant question

☐ Leave the issue unresolved

Why?

---

39. When an Answer Raises Another Question

This is normal.

Ask:

New question:

Is it genuinely important?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is it simply interesting?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does it materially affect discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Must it be answered now?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do not allow every answer to generate an endless new branch of inquiry. At some point discernment requires decision.

40. When the Answer Is Not What We Wanted

Question:

Answer:

What answer had we hoped for?

Why?

Is the candidate's actual answer incompatible with ministry here?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Unsure

Or is it simply different from what we preferred?

Do not confuse disappointment with disqualification.

41. When the Candidate Says “I Don't Know”

“I don't know” can be a good answer.

Ask:

What does the candidate do with not knowing?

Did they:

☐ Pretend certainty

☐ Become curious

☐ Ask questions

☐ Name what they would need to learn

☐ Describe how they would seek help

☐ Reflect thoughtfully

☐ Become defensive

☐ Other: _____

Sometimes the committee learns more from how a candidate handles uncertainty than from a polished answer.

---

42. What Still Cannot Be Resolved?

After all appropriate follow-up:

Something we still do not know:

Why can't we know it now?

Is it essential?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Can faithful discernment continue without certainty?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

What must happen?

If yes, name the uncertainty and carry it honestly.

---

43. Are We Seeking Certainty?

Ask the committee:

What would we still like to know before making a decision?

Then ask:

Could any amount of interviewing actually give us certainty about that?

If not, another interview will not solve the problem.

---

44. What Would Be Enough?

Complete:

We will have enough information to discern when…

This is an important boundary; without it, the committee can continue gathering information indefinitely.

---

45. What Are We Afraid Of?

Sometimes the remaining question is not about the candidate.

It is:

What if we are wrong?

Name the fear.

We are afraid that:

Is there additional information that could realistically address this fear?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

If no:

What would it mean to discern faithfully without certainty?

---

46. The Question Beneath the Questions

After reviewing everything, ask:

What is the one question beneath all of our remaining questions?

Perhaps it is:

Can we trust this person?

or:

Can we imagine sharing leadership with this person?

or:

Are we willing to change?

or:

Does this candidate understand ministry in a way we can share?

or:

Are we afraid to begin again if we say no?

or:

Are we afraid to say yes?

Name the deeper question.

---

47. Questions for Ourselves

Before asking anything else of the candidate, ask:

Are we ready to be led?

Are we ready to become partners in ministry?

Are we expecting the candidate to solve problems that belong to us?

Are we willing to receive gifts that may change us?

Are we willing to live with differences?

Are we willing to be known honestly by this candidate?

Are we ready to make a decision?

The candidate may not be the only one with remaining questions.

---

48. Final Remaining Questions List

After completing the worksheet, list only the questions that genuinely remain.

Question 1

Why it matters:

Who should answer:

When:

Question 2

Why it matters:

Who should answer:

When:

Question 3

Why it matters:

Who should answer:

When:

---

49. When Those Questions Are Answered

Agree before asking:

When these questions have been explored, we will return to discernment rather than automatically creating another round of questions.

Date for discernment conversation:

Additional information needed before then:

Person responsible:

---

50. Final Reflection

Individually complete:

Something I know now that I did not know when we began:

Something I still wish I knew:

Something I recognize cannot be known:

Something I have learned about the candidate:

Something I have learned about our congregation:

Something I have learned about myself:

The question I believe still matters most:

Leader's Note

Near the end of a search, questions can become a refuge.

One more interview.

One more reference.

One more conversation.

One more scenario.

One more chance to make sure.

The desire is understandable. Calling a pastor matters, and the decision will affect a congregation and a pastor for years.

But there comes a point when additional information no longer produces greater clarity; it simply postpones the vulnerability of choosing.

You cannot interview your way into certainty.

You cannot ask enough questions to know how a pastor will respond to every future challenge.

You cannot know what the congregation will become.

You cannot know what the pastor will become.

A call is not a prediction that everything will work. It is a discerned willingness to enter a relationship and discover what faithful ministry together may become.

Ask the questions that matter.

Clarify inconsistencies.

Explore significant concerns.

Be honest about expectations.

Do not leave important matters unspoken merely because the committee is tired of interviewing.

When the questions that genuinely matter have been asked, stop asking.

Return to the patterns.

Return to what you have seen and heard.

Return to prayer.

And ask:

Do we know enough—not to be certain, but to take the next faithful step?

FM 9.8

Discernment Before Recommendation

Purpose

Eventually the Search Committee must move from gathering information to making a recommendation.

That movement deserves care.

A recommendation should not emerge simply because:

- everyone likes the candidate
- the interview weekend went well
- references were positive
- the search has taken a long time
- the committee is tired
- no one has identified a reason to say no
- the candidate seems better than previous candidates
- the committee is afraid of beginning again

Nor should the committee expect certainty.

Discernment asks something different:

Given what we have seen, heard, prayed about, and learned throughout this search, what are we being invited to recognize?

This guide is designed for the committee's final discernment conversation before a formal recommendation or vote.

Do not begin with:

"Are we ready to vote?"

Begin with:

"What have we come to recognize?"

---

1. Do Not Begin With a Vote

Voting too early changes the conversation.

Once committee members publicly declare:

Yes

or

No

they naturally begin defending their positions.

Discernment becomes debate.

Before anyone takes a position, create room to listen again.

For this conversation:

☐ No straw poll

☐ No show of hands

☐ No “Where is everybody?”

☐ No lobbying before the meeting

☐ No assumption that consensus already exists

Begin together.

---

2. Prepare the Room

Bring:

☐ Ministry Discernment Profile or equivalent congregational profile

☐ Candidate materials

☐ Interview notes

☐ Scenario notes

☐ Interview Weekend Reflection Worksheets

☐ FM 9.2 — Observation Before Opinions

☐ FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search

☐ Reference summaries

☐ FM 9.7 — Remaining Questions Worksheet

☐ Terms of Call information, if appropriate

☐ Other relevant search materials

Do not bring every scrap of paper simply because it exists.

Bring what helps the committee remember the whole search.

---

3. Begin With Prayer

Do not use prayer merely to open the meeting.

Allow it to change the pace of the room.

Pray for:

- freedom from the need to be certain
- freedom from fear of making a mistake
- freedom from attachment to a preferred outcome
- honesty about concerns
- gratitude for the candidate
- care for the congregation
- care for the candidate and their household
- wisdom to recognize what is emerging
- courage to respond faithfully

Then allow silence.

---

4. Remember the Work Is Already God's

Before talking about the candidate, remember why the congregation exists.

Complete together:

We believe Christ is already at work in our congregation through:

We believe Christ is already at work in our community through:

We believe our congregation is being called toward:

Now ask:

What kind of pastoral partnership might help us join that work more faithfully?

The question is larger than whether you like the candidate.

5. Return to What We Said We Were Seeking

At the beginning of the search, the congregation named hopes, needs, gifts, challenges, and a sense of call.

Return to them.

We said this season of ministry required:

We said these gifts would matter:

We identified these challenges:

We hoped our next pastor would help us:

Now ask:

Has our understanding changed during the search?

A search should teach the committee something.

Do not remain bound by criteria created before you began meeting candidates.

---

6. Remember the Candidate as a Whole Person

Do not reduce the candidate to:

- résumé
- sermon
- interview performance
- personality
- one concern
- one strength
- reference comments

Complete:

Across this search, we have come to know this candidate as someone who…

Try to describe the person without evaluative adjectives.

7. Return to the Patterns

Use **FM 9.3 — Looking for Patterns Across the Search**.

The strongest pattern we have recognized:

Another:

Another:

A pattern that gives us particular energy:

A pattern that gives us pause:

A pattern that became clearer through references:

A pattern that changed as the search continued:

Do not allow the final weekend to erase the months that preceded it.

8. What Gifts Have We Consistently Seen?

Name gifts supported by repeated observation.

Gift:

Evidence:

Gift:

Evidence:

Gift:

Evidence:

Now ask:

Why might these gifts matter in this congregation and community?

9. What Concerns Remain?

Do not suppress concerns to achieve unanimity.

Concern:

What observations support it?

Is it:

☐ An isolated event

☐ An emerging pattern

☐ A strong pattern

☐ An unresolved inconsistency

☐ A difference

☐ A preference

☐ An intuition we have not yet understood

Why does it matter?

10. Has the Concern Been Explored?

For each significant concern:

Did we ask the candidate about it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did references provide useful perspective?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not applicable

Did later experience reinforce it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Did later experience complicate it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do we understand it sufficiently to discern?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, the committee may not be ready to recommend.

Do not vote simply to resolve uncertainty that still requires responsible exploration.

---

11. Difference or Incompatibility?

Name important differences between candidate and congregation.

Difference:

Is it primarily:

☐ Theology

☐ Leadership

☐ Personality

☐ Generation

☐ Communication

☐ Worship

☐ Experience

☐ Culture

☐ Preference

☐ Other: _____

Then ask:

Could faithful ministry happen within this difference?

Could this difference strengthen us?

Would it require growth from us?

Would it require growth from the candidate?

Or does this difference make healthy partnership unlikely?

Not every difference needs resolution.

---

12. Name What Attracts Us

We are particularly drawn to:

Why?

Is our attraction connected to:

☐ Gifts needed for ministry

☐ Shared theology

☐ Leadership

☐ Mission

☐ Personality

☐ Familiarity

☐ Charisma

☐ Preaching

☐ Similarity to a former pastor

☐ Relief after a difficult search

☐ Other: _____

Enthusiasm belongs in discernment. So does curiosity about it.

---

13. Name What Makes Us Hesitate

We hesitate because:

Is the hesitation connected to:

☐ Evidence

☐ A repeated pattern

☐ An unresolved question

☐ Difference

☐ Fear

☐ Previous congregational experience

☐ Comparison with another candidate

☐ Personal preference

☐ Uncertainty

☐ Other: _____

What does the hesitation need from us?

☐ Further information

☐ Conversation

☐ Prayer

☐ Acceptance of difference

☐ Attention to a serious concern

☐ Willingness to live without certainty

☐ Other: _____

---

14. Listen for Projection

Ask individually:

What might I be asking this candidate to represent for me?

Perhaps:

- a return to a beloved former pastorate
- recovery from a difficult pastor
- youth
- stability
- growth
- theological agreement
- change
- safety
- energy
- prestige
- reassurance

I may be projecting:

How might that be affecting my discernment?

---

15. Listen for Rescue Fantasies

Complete:

We may be hoping this candidate will fix…

Ask:

Is this something a pastor can actually fix?

What responsibility belongs to the congregation?

What responsibility would belong to pastor and congregation together?

A pastoral call is a partnership, not a rescue plan.

16. Listen for Fear of Starting Again

Ask plainly:

If this candidate withdrew today, what would we feel?

Then:

Are we recommending this candidate because we discern a call—or because we cannot bear the thought of reopening the search?

Search fatigue is real. It is not a call.

---

17. Listen for the “Best Candidate” Problem

The question is not:

Is this the best candidate we have interviewed?

Nor:

Is this candidate better than the others?

Ask:

Do we recognize the possibility of faithful partnership between this candidate and this congregation?

A pastoral search is not a tournament.

---

18. Listen for the “Good Enough” Problem

Another temptation appears late in a long search:

“Nobody is perfect.”

True.

But that sentence can be used to dismiss legitimate concerns.

Ask:

Are we accepting normal human limitation?

Or rationalizing something significant because we want the search to end?

Grace does not require denial.

---

19. Listen for the “Perfect Candidate” Problem

The opposite temptation is equally dangerous.

Ask:

Are we rejecting a real person because we are comparing them with an imaginary pastor?

Our imagined pastor can:

Is that expectation realistic?

No candidate will embody every gift the congregation desires.

Nor will any pastor remain exactly the person you call.

---

20. What Have References Added?

Do not ask:

Did the candidate pass the reference check?

Ask:

References reinforced:

References complicated:

References helped us understand:

References raised:

Anything significant has been appropriately explored:

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, do not rush forward.

21. Have the Remaining Questions Been Addressed?

Return to **FM 9.7 — Remaining Questions Worksheet**.

Questions we identified as “must know”:

Have they been explored?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Questions still unanswered:

Can they reasonably be answered now?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Must they be answered before recommendation?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, stop and address them.

---

22. What Cannot Be Known?

Name it.

We cannot know:

We wish we could know:

We recognize that another interview would not tell us:

We may need to accept uncertainty about:

Discernment is not certainty.

23. What Would Ministry Together Require of the Candidate?

This call would require the candidate to:

Adapt to:

Learn:

Lead courageously around:

Exercise patience around:

Share leadership around:

Now ask:

Do the patterns we have observed suggest the candidate can enter that work faithfully?

24. What Would Ministry Together Require of Us?

Turn the question around.

This candidate would require our congregation to:

Become more willing to:

Take responsibility for:

Release:

Learn:

Change:

Now ask:

Are we willing?

A committee cannot responsibly recommend a candidate while assuming only the pastor will need to change.

25. Imagine the Partnership

Do not predict success. Imagine ordinary ministry.

Imagine the candidate and session one year from now.

What might be working well?

What might require attention?

Imagine the candidate and staff.

What might be fruitful?

What might require learning?

Imagine the candidate in the community.

What possibilities can we see?

Imagine the congregation after three years of ministry together.

What might we hope has become possible?

---

26. The Energy Question

Ask each member privately:

When I imagine this candidate beginning ministry with us, what happens in me?

I experience:

☐ Energy

☐ Hope

☐ Curiosity

☐ Peace

☐ Excitement

☐ Caution

☐ Anxiety

☐ Resistance

☐ Fatigue

☐ Grief

☐ Uncertainty

☐ Other: _____

What might this response be telling me?

Feelings are information, not verdicts.

---

27. The Freedom Question

Ask:

Are we free to say either yes or no?

Are we free to say yes?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, what prevents us?

Are we free to say no?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, what prevents us?

Discernment becomes distorted when only one answer feels permissible.

---

28. The Candidate's Freedom Matters Too

Remember:

The candidate is also discerning.

They may say no.

They may have concerns.

They may need clarification.

They may see something the committee does not.

Ask:

Have we made enough room for the candidate to discern us honestly?

Have we responded honestly to their questions?

Do they know enough about our challenges as well as our strengths?

A recommendation should not depend on the candidate knowing less than the committee.

29. Have We Told the Truth About Ourselves?

Before recommending a call, ask:

Have we been honest about:

Congregational health?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Finances?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Staff relationships?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Past conflict or significant differences?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Expectations of the pastor?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Mission and community engagement?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Challenges ahead?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Is there anything significant the candidate still needs to know?

Mutual discernment requires mutual truthfulness.

30. The Partnership Statement

As a committee, attempt to complete this sentence:

We believe a partnership between this candidate and this congregation could be fruitful because…

Then:

We believe this partnership would require particular attention to…

Both statements matter. A mature recommendation contains hope without fantasy.

31. Speak One at a Time

Before discussion, give every committee member uninterrupted space.

Complete:

What I have come to recognize is…

The evidence that matters most to me is…

What gives me hope is…

What gives me pause is…

What I believe this partnership would require is…

No one responds until everyone has spoken.

32. Listen for Convergence

After everyone has spoken, ask:

What did we hear repeatedly?

Where is there strong convergence?

What concerns were shared?

What concerns were held by only one person?

What surprised us?

Do not immediately turn minority concerns into problems to overcome. Listen first.

---

33. When One Person Sees Something Others Do Not

Ask that person:

Help us understand what you are seeing.

Then ask:

What observations have led you there?

Is this:

☐ A significant pattern

☐ An observation others interpreted differently

☐ An intuition worth exploring

☐ A personal preference

☐ A difference in theology or values

☐ A concern requiring more information

☐ Other: _____

A lone voice is not automatically prophetic, nor is it automatically wrong.

---

34. Do Not Pressure Toward Unanimity

Consensus is valuable. Manufactured consensus is not.

Avoid:

"Can you live with everyone else's decision?"

when what is really meant is:

"Will you stop objecting?"

Instead ask:

What would you need in order to participate faithfully in a recommendation?

And:

Is your concern something you can hold within a recommendation, or does it prevent you from recommending the candidate?

Let people answer honestly.

---

35. Distinguish Concern From Veto

A committee member may have a genuine concern and still discern that the call should proceed.

My concern:

I believe it is:

☐ Serious enough that I cannot recommend the candidate

☐ Significant but compatible with recommendation

☐ Something that should be named in beginning ministry

☐ Something I can release

☐ Something I still need help understanding

This distinction frees a committee from assuming that recommendation requires every concern to disappear.

---

36. Distinguish Enthusiasm From Call

Likewise:

I am enthusiastic because:

Evidence supporting my enthusiasm:

Does my enthusiasm connect with the congregation's vocation and the candidate's demonstrated patterns?

Enthusiasm is a gift. Ground it.

---

37. What Would Make Us Say No?

Before deciding, ask:

What would need to be true for us to conclude that this is not a faithful partnership?

Then:

Have we actually seen evidence of those things?

This helps distinguish real concerns from generalized anxiety.

---

38. What Is Drawing Us Toward Yes?

Ask:

What is drawing us toward recommending this candidate?

Is it primarily:

☐ Demonstrated gifts

☐ Consistent patterns

☐ Shared theological commitments

☐ Complementary gifts

☐ Mission imagination

☐ Relational trust

☐ Leadership capacity

☐ A growing sense of partnership

☐ Search fatigue

☐ Fear of losing the candidate

☐ Lack of alternatives

☐ Other: _____

Be truthful.

---

39. What Is Drawing Us Toward No?

Ask:

What is drawing us away from recommending this candidate?

Is it primarily:

☐ Significant concerns

☐ Consistent patterns

☐ Theological incompatibility

☐ Leadership incompatibility

☐ Lack of trust

☐ Expectations that cannot be reconciled

☐ Personal preference

☐ Difference

☐ Fear of change

☐ Comparison with an ideal candidate

☐ Other: _____

Be equally truthful.

---

40. Return to Silence

After the conversation has gone as far as it can go, stop.

Do not fill the room.

Allow several minutes of silence.

Invite each person to hold three things:

The congregation.

The candidate.

The ministry they might share.

No arguments.

No persuading.

No final speeches.

Listen.

---

41. Complete Individually

After silence:

I recognize:

I remain concerned about:

I am willing to release:

I believe the next faithful step is:

Do not yet discuss.

---

42. Share the Next Faithful Step

Go around the room.

Each person says only:

"I believe the next faithful step is..."

Record:

Now the committee can see where discernment has led.

---

43. If There Is Strong Convergence

If the committee has reached strong convergence toward recommendation, ask:

Have all significant questions been addressed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have significant concerns been heard?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are required reference and denominational processes complete?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are Terms of Call sufficiently understood?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Has the candidate received an honest picture of the congregation?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Are we ready for formal action?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, proceed according to your congregation's and presbytery's required process.

---

44. If There Is Strong Convergence Toward No

Do not manufacture additional interviews simply because saying no is painful.

Ask:

What have we recognized?

What patterns led us here?

Have we treated the candidate fairly?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Is additional information realistically likely to change the discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, it may be time to release the candidate.

Return as needed to the resources in **Section Seven — When Discernment Leads to No**.

---

45. If the Committee Is Divided

Do not immediately vote simply to end the disagreement.

Ask:

What is the disagreement actually about?

Are we interpreting the same evidence differently?

Do some members have information others do not?

Is an unresolved question involved?

Is a theological or vocational difference involved?

Is fear shaping either side?

Would additional information genuinely help?

If yes, identify exactly what is needed.

If no, the committee may need additional time for discernment.

---

46. If More Time Is Needed

Name what the time is for.

Not:

"Let's wait another week."

Instead:

"We need several days to pray and reflect on whether the concern we identified is significant enough to prevent recommendation."

What are we discerning?

What additional information, if any, is needed?

What are we *not* going to do?

When will we reconvene?

Do not allow “more time” to become indefinite avoidance.

---

47. Before Formal Recommendation

Complete together:

We believe we understand the candidate's significant gifts.

☐ Yes

We have honestly considered significant concerns.

☐ Yes

We have explored important inconsistencies.

☐ Yes

We have completed appropriate reference work.

☐ Yes

We have addressed remaining must-know questions.

☐ Yes

We have distinguished differences from incompatibilities.

☐ Yes

We have examined our assumptions.

☐ Yes

We have examined our hopes and fears.

☐ Yes

We have been honest with the candidate about ourselves.

☐ Yes

We recognize that uncertainty remains.

☐ Yes

We believe we know enough to take the next faithful step.

☐ Yes

---

48. Draft the Discernment Statement

Before formal action, write a short statement together.

Not:

"We really like this candidate."

Not:

"Everyone thinks this is the right person."

Try:

"Across our conversations, interviews, observations, reference conversations, and prayer, we have consistently recognized..."

Complete:

"We believe these gifts connect with our congregation's vocation because..."

"We also recognize that ministry together will require attention to..."

"With these gifts, challenges, and uncertainties honestly before us, we believe..."

This becomes the committee's articulation of its discernment.

49. Now the Recommendation

Only now move toward whatever formal recommendation or vote your process requires.

The vote should confirm the discernment conversation, not substitute for it.

Record according to required procedures:

Action:

Date:

Required vote:

Result:

Next procedural step:

Person responsible:

---

50. If the Recommendation Is Yes

Do not immediately shift into celebration and logistics.

First acknowledge what has happened.

You have not proven that this candidate is the right pastor.

You have discerned enough trust to recommend entering a pastoral relationship.

That is both more modest and more significant.

Ask:

What do we want to remember from this discernment when ministry becomes difficult someday?

Gifts we recognized:

Challenges we knew about:

Commitments we understood would be required of us:

Save these reflections. They may matter later.

---

51. If the Recommendation Is No

A no does not mean:

27. the candidate failed
28. the search failed
29. the committee wasted its time
30. the candidate lacks gifts for ministry

It means the committee did not recognize sufficient convergence for this particular pastoral partnership.

Ask:

What are we grateful to have learned from this candidate?

What did the candidate help us understand about ourselves?

What has become clearer about the pastor we are seeking?

What do we need to release?

Then communicate promptly, honestly, and graciously.

52. If the Recommendation Is Not Yet

Sometimes the faithful answer is neither yes nor no.

It is:

We are not ready.

But “not yet” needs a reason.

We are not ready because:

What must happen before discernment can continue?

Who is responsible?

By when?

If nothing specific needs to happen, “not yet” may simply be fear wearing the clothes of discernment.

---

53. A Prayer Before Recommendation

God of every calling,

You have been present before we began this search
and present through every conversation along the way.

You know this congregation more fully than we do.

You know this candidate more fully than we do.

You know the ministry that may become possible between us.

Free us from the need to be certain.

Free us from fear.

Free us from our attachment to having things turn out as we imagine.

Give us gratitude for what we have received,
honesty about what we have learned,
humility about what we cannot know,
and courage to respond to what we recognize.

If this relationship is ours to enter,
give us courage to say yes.

If it is ours to release,
give us courage to say no.

And if there is something we still need to hear,
give us patience enough to listen.

We entrust this candidate, this congregation,
and the future we cannot see
to your grace.

Amen.

---

54. Final Reflection

Before leaving the room, each member completes:

Something for which I am grateful:

Something I have learned about this candidate:

Something I have learned about our congregation:

Something I have learned about discernment:

Something I am ready to entrust to God:

Leader's Note

Search Committees sometimes imagine that the final meeting should feel different from all the others.

After months of reading, interviewing, listening, praying, checking references, and asking questions, surely there should come a moment when everyone simply knows.

Sometimes that happens.

Often it does not.

There may still be a concern.

Someone may still wish the candidate had more experience in one area.

Someone else may wonder about a difference in leadership style.

The committee may wish it knew how the candidate would respond to a situation that has not happened yet.

That does not mean discernment has failed.

It means you are calling a human being into relationship with other human beings.

The purpose of this process has never been to remove uncertainty. It has been to help you pay attention.

You have listened to stories.

You have asked better questions.

You have watched how the candidate responds when the conversation goes somewhere unexpected.

You have explored theology.

You have seen the candidate encounter your congregation and community.

You have listened to the questions the candidate asks of you.

You have heard from people who have shared ministry with them.

You have examined your own assumptions.

Gradually, patterns have emerged.

Now the question is not:

Can we guarantee that this will work?

You cannot.

Nor is it:

Is this candidate everything we hoped to find?

No human being will be.

The question is:

Do we recognize enough in this candidate, in ourselves, and in the possibility of ministry together to trust the next faithful step?

If the answer is yes, recommendation is not the end of discernment. It is the beginning of a relationship.

The congregation will continue learning the pastor.

The pastor will continue learning the congregation.

Both will change.

Both will disappoint one another.

Both will discover gifts they could not see during the search.

And, if the relationship is tended faithfully, they may discover something neither could have created alone:

a shared ministry that emerges between them as together they join the work Christ is already doing in their place.

Chapter Ten — Extending the Call

Calling New Leadership — Field Manual

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

FM 10.1

Preparing to Recommend a Candidate

Purpose

The Search Committee has discerned that it is ready to recommend a candidate.

That is a significant moment.

But the committee's work is not finished.

The candidate may still need to make a final decision. The congregation, session, presbytery, or other governing body may have responsibilities in the call process. Terms of Call may need to be finalized. A congregational meeting may need to be prepared. Confidentiality may still matter.

And the committee now has another responsibility:

How do we faithfully introduce this candidate to the congregation we are asking to call them?

This is not a sales campaign.

The committee does not need to persuade the congregation that it has found a perfect pastor.

It needs to tell the story of its discernment clearly, honestly, and confidently.

This worksheet helps the committee prepare to make that recommendation.

---

1. Confirm That Discernment Is Complete

Before moving into recommendation, confirm:

☐ FM 9.8 — Discernment Before Recommendation has been completed

☐ Significant concerns have been explored

☐ Required references have been completed

☐ Remaining must-know questions have been addressed

☐ Candidate has received an honest picture of the congregation

☐ Committee has reached the level of agreement required by its process

☐ Committee is prepared to recommend the candidate

☐ Appropriate presbytery/judicatory requirements have been reviewed

☐ Required background or clearance processes have been completed or appropriately initiated

Anything still incomplete:

Do not allow excitement to outrun the process.

2. Confirm the Candidate Is Still Discerning With You

Before beginning public preparations, confirm that the candidate understands where the committee is.

Ask:

Are you prepared for us to move toward the next stage of the call process?

Candidate response:

Questions the candidate still has:

Matters requiring resolution:

A committee should not prepare a public recommendation while assuming the candidate will say yes.

3. Know What Happens Next

Every denomination and presbytery may have procedural requirements.

Identify yours.

Next required action:

Who authorizes it?

Who initiates it?

Deadline:

Following action:

Responsible person:

Required documents:

Do not rely on someone's memory of how the last search worked. Verify the current process.

---

4. Identify Who Needs to Know—and When

Until the appropriate moment, confidentiality still matters.

People who need to know now:

People who do not yet need to know:

Who will communicate with the session/governing body?

Who will communicate with presbytery/judicatory?

Who will communicate with staff?

Who will communicate with the congregation?

Who will communicate with other candidates, if necessary?

Create a sequence before information begins moving.

---

5. Protect the Candidate's Current Ministry

A candidate's current congregation may not yet know they are considering another call.

Ask:

Has the candidate told their current congregation?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not yet appropriate

Are there confidentiality concerns?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What information may be shared publicly?

Beginning when?

Do not announce someone else's transition for them.

---

6. Confirm the Terms of Call

Before recommending a candidate, there should be clarity about the proposed Terms of Call.

Review:

☐ Salary

☐ Housing or housing allowance

☐ Benefits

☐ Pension requirements

☐ Vacation

☐ Study leave

☐ Continuing education allowance

☐ Professional expenses

☐ Moving expenses

☐ Sabbatical provisions, if applicable

☐ Start date

☐ Other: _____

Items still unresolved:

Who will resolve them?

By when?

Spiritual discernment and practical clarity belong together.

---

7. Make Sure the Candidate Understands the Terms

Do not assume that because a document was sent, it was understood.

Ask:

Are there any parts of the proposed Terms of Call you would like to discuss or clarify?

Candidate questions:

Changes requested:

Agreements reached:

Items requiring further authorization:

Avoid surprises after the recommendation.

8. Revisit Expectations

Before recommendation, return once more to expectations.

The congregation is likely to expect:

The candidate understands those expectations as:

The candidate is likely to expect:

The committee understands those expectations as:

Possible mismatches:

What should be clarified now?

Unspoken expectations are future conflicts waiting for a calendar.

9. What Are We Actually Recommending?

Complete together:

We are recommending this candidate because…

Do not begin with personality.

Do not begin with:

“Everyone loved them.”

Return to the substance of discernment.

10. Name the Candidate's Gifts

We consistently observed these gifts:

Gift:

Evidence:

Gift:

Evidence:

Gift:

Evidence:

Choose gifts you have actually observed.

---

11. Connect Gifts With Congregational Vocation

The recommendation should answer:

Why this candidate for this congregation in this season?

Our congregation is being called toward:

This candidate brings:

We see a connection because:

This is the heart of the recommendation.

---

12. Tell the Story of the Search

The congregation does not need every detail.

But it should understand that the recommendation emerged from a serious process.

Our search included:

☐ Prayer

☐ Reading candidate materials

☐ Multiple interviews

☐ Story questions

☐ Scenario conversations

☐ Theological conversation

☐ Candidate questions

☐ Interview weekend

☐ Community exploration

☐ Reference conversations

☐ Committee reflection

☐ Discernment

☐ Other: _____

What should the congregation understand about the process?

Keep this concise.

The point is not to prove how hard the committee worked, but to help the congregation trust the integrity of the process.

---

13. Tell the Story of Recognition

Instead of presenting a list of credentials, ask:

What did we gradually begin to recognize?

Early in the search we noticed:

As conversations continued:

During deeper interviews:

During the interview weekend:

References helped us see:

Eventually we recognized:

This gives the congregation the story behind the recommendation.

---

14. What Should the Congregation Know About the Candidate?

Identify the most important things.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Five is enough. You are introducing a pastor, not reading a résumé aloud.

15. What Should the Congregation Experience for Itself?

Do not explain everything. Some things should be encountered.

Perhaps:

- preaching
- warmth
- thoughtfulness
- humor

- curiosity
- prayer
- theological depth
- ability to listen
- way of engaging people

We do not need to tell the congregation:

We can allow them to experience:

Trust the encounter.

---

16. Do Not Oversell

Avoid language such as:

“We found exactly the pastor we were looking for.”

“This candidate has everything we need.”

“Everyone on the committee knew immediately.”

“This is the perfect fit.”

“We know this is God's choice.”

Such claims create expectations no pastor can fulfill.

Prefer:

“Through our discernment, we came to recognize…”

“We believe these gifts connect meaningfully with…”

“We became increasingly hopeful about the possibility of ministry together…”

Confidence does not require exaggeration.

17. Do Not Undersell Either

Humility does not require timidity.

Avoid:

“Well, nobody is perfect.”

“We think this person might work out.”

“We couldn't find anyone who had everything.”

“After a long search, this seemed like the best option.”

If you are recommending the candidate, recommend them.

The congregation deserves to hear why you have confidence in the recommendation.

18. What Remains Confidential?

The congregation does not need access to the entire discernment process.

Do not disclose:

- reference comments
- confidential interview discussions
- candidate vulnerabilities shared in trust
- committee members' individual concerns
- comparisons with other candidates
- names or information about other candidates
- private family information
- information protected by search procedures

Information we must protect:

A recommendation can be transparent without violating confidentiality.

19. Do Not Compare Candidates

Avoid:

“We interviewed seven people, but this candidate was clearly better than the others.”

The other candidates entrusted themselves to your process too.

Your recommendation should stand on its own.

Say why you recommend this candidate.

Do not explain why you rejected everyone else.

20. Anticipate Congregational Questions

What is the congregation likely to ask?

Question:

Appropriate response:

Question:

Appropriate response:

Question:

Appropriate response:

Question:

Appropriate response:

---

21. Questions You Should Not Answer

A congregational member may ask:

“Were there any red flags?”

“What did the references say?”

“Did anyone on the committee vote against the candidate?”

“Who else did you interview?”

“Was this your first choice?”

Prepare a response.

For example:

“We took our responsibility to explore questions and concerns seriously. Those conversations are confidential. What we can tell you is that after completing the process, the committee is prepared to recommend this candidate.”

Other questions requiring confidentiality:

Our response:

22. Anticipate Anxiety

Some congregational questions will not really be requests for information.

They may be expressions of anxiety.

For example:

“Will the candidate visit people?”

may mean:

“Will someone be there when I need a pastor?”

Or:

“Will they change the worship service?”

may mean:

“Will the church I love still feel like my church?”

Or:

“Will they attract young families?”

may mean:

“Does our congregation have a future?”

Listen for the question beneath the question.

23. What Can We Promise?

Very little about the future.

You cannot promise:

- church growth
- absence of conflict
- everyone will like the pastor
- worship will never change
- finances will improve
- young families will arrive
- the pastor will stay for a particular number of years

You can speak about what you have observed.

We can say with confidence:

_____

_____

We cannot promise:

_____

_____

Keep those categories separate.

_____

24. Prepare the Candidate Biography

The congregation will need a concise introduction.

Include only what is appropriate and authorized.

Possible information:

☐ Current ministry

☐ Previous ministry experience

☐ Education

☐ Significant areas of ministry

☐ Particular gifts or interests

☐ Community engagement

☐ Appropriate family information the candidate wishes shared

☐ Candidate photograph

☐ Other: _____

Who will draft the biography?

Who will approve it?

The candidate should review personal information before publication.

---

25. Prepare the Committee's Recommendation

The recommendation should answer three questions:

Who is the candidate?

What did we recognize?

Why do we believe this pastoral partnership is worth entering?

That is enough.

---

26. Draft a One-Minute Recommendation

Complete:

"After a careful process of prayer, conversation, interviews, listening, and reference conversations, the Search Committee is pleased to recommend _____ as our candidate for _____."

Then:

"Throughout our conversations, we consistently recognized…"

"These gifts seem especially important for our congregation because…"

"We became increasingly hopeful about the possibility that together…"

Keep it human.

---

27. Draft a Three-Minute Recommendation

If a fuller presentation is appropriate, use this structure:

Our Search

Briefly describe the process.

What We Recognized

Name two or three patterns.

Why It Matters Here

Connect those patterns to congregational vocation.

Our Recommendation

State it clearly.

Do not turn the presentation into a committee report. Tell the discernment story.

28. Decide Who Will Speak

One person may be best.

Or several people may tell different parts of the story.

Speaker:

Responsibility:

Speaker:

Responsibility:

Speaker:

Responsibility:

Avoid having every committee member speak simply so everyone participates.

Choose what best serves the congregation.

---

29. Speak With One Voice

Committee members may have reached recommendation through different paths.

That is fine.

Once a recommendation has been made according to your agreed process, clarify what committee members will communicate publicly.

Our shared recommendation is:

Questions we will answer consistently:

Matters that remain confidential:

Speaking with one voice does not mean pretending everyone had identical experiences.

It means honoring the discernment the committee has completed.

---

30. Prepare for the Candidate's Introduction

Depending upon your process, the candidate may be introduced through:

☐ Written biography

☐ Congregational letter

☐ Email

☐ Website

☐ Video

☐ Informal gathering

☐ Candidate weekend

☐ Worship

☐ Congregational meeting

☐ Other: _____

Sequence:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Coordinate the sequence with the candidate.

_____

31. Candidate Weekend or Candidating Visit

If your process includes a public candidating weekend, clarify:

Purpose:

_____

_____

What congregation will experience:

_____

_____

What candidate will experience:

_____

_____

What is still being discerned:

_____

_____

What has already been decided:

_____

_____

Do not create ambiguity about the purpose of the weekend.

_____

32. Prepare the Congregation to Meet a Person, Not a Performance

The congregation may have only a few hours with someone the committee has known for months.

Remind them:

A candidating weekend cannot reproduce the search.

They will encounter one sermon.

One conversation.

One weekend.

The Search Committee's recommendation rests on a much larger body of experience.

What does the congregation need to understand about this?

33. Avoid Turning the Weekend Into Another Interview

If the committee has completed its discernment, do not subject the candidate to another unplanned interrogation.

Clarify:

Appropriate opportunities for questions:

Who facilitates them?

Topics appropriate for congregational conversation:

Topics that remain confidential or inappropriate:

Hospitality still matters.

---

34. Prepare Congregational Leaders

People who may need advance preparation:

☐ Session/governing body

☐ Clerk

☐ Staff

☐ Worship leaders

☐ Musicians

☐ Ushers/greeters

☐ Personnel leadership

☐ Presbytery representatives

☐ Other: _____

What does each need to know?

When?

---

35. Prepare Staff Carefully

Staff members may experience a pastoral transition differently from the congregation.

A new pastor may become:

31. supervisor
32. colleague
33. head of staff

34. partner in ministry

They may feel:

43. hope
44. anxiety
45. curiosity
46. grief
47. uncertainty

What do staff need to know?

What should remain confidential?

Who will communicate with them?

Treat staff as people, not logistical pieces in the transition.

---

36. Prepare for Questions About Change

Someone will probably ask:

“What is the candidate going to change?”

A useful response may be:

“We are not calling a pastor with a predetermined list of changes. Pastor and congregation will need to listen, learn, and discern together.”

Our congregation's likely concern about change:

Our response:

A call is not a preapproved program.

---

37. Prepare for Questions About Growth

Someone may ask:

“Will this pastor grow the church?”

Do not promise what no pastor can promise.

A useful response:

“We were not searching for someone to grow the church for us. We were discerning a pastor who can help us become more faithful partners in the ministry Christ has entrusted to this congregation.”

How will we speak about growth?

---

38. Prepare for Questions About Fit

“Fit” can become dangerously vague.

Instead of:

“The candidate is a great fit.”

say what you mean.

Perhaps:

"We consistently saw a collaborative leadership style that connects with the kind of shared ministry our congregation is seeking."

When we say "fit," we actually mean:

Better yet, speak about **partnership**.

---

39. Name the Partnership

Complete:

We believe this candidate brings…

Our congregation brings…

Together, we imagine…

This is stronger than describing what the candidate will do for the congregation.

---

40. Remember That Recommendation Is an Invitation

The committee is not delivering a finished future to the congregation.

It is saying:

We have walked this journey carefully.

We have come to know this candidate.

We have allowed the candidate to know us.

We have seen gifts, limitations, possibilities, and challenges.

And we believe there is enough here to enter ministry together.

That is the recommendation.

---

41. Recommendation Readiness Checklist

Candidate

☐ Candidate is ready to proceed

☐ Candidate knows next steps

☐ Candidate has approved information to be shared

☐ Confidentiality concerns have been addressed

☐ Candidate questions have been answered

Committee

☐ Discernment complete

☐ Recommendation clear

☐ Speakers identified

☐ Shared language prepared

☐ Confidentiality boundaries clear

☐ Congregational questions anticipated

Process

☐ Denominational requirements confirmed

☐ Presbytery/judicatory responsibilities confirmed

☐ Terms of Call sufficiently resolved

☐ Required approvals identified

☐ Communication sequence established

☐ Candidate weekend/congregational meeting planned as appropriate

---

42. Before Anything Becomes Public

Ask one final time:

Does the candidate know what we are about to announce?

☐ Yes

Does the candidate agree with the timing?

☐ Yes

Have appropriate denominational steps been completed?

☐ Yes

Does everyone who needs advance notice have it?

☐ Yes

Are we protecting information that remains confidential?

☐ Yes

Are our written materials accurate?

☐ Yes

Has the candidate reviewed biographical information?

☐ Yes

If any answer is no, resolve it before publication.

---

43. The Committee's Final Preparation

Before introducing the candidate, complete together:

The most important thing we want the congregation to understand about this candidate is:

The most important thing we want the congregation to understand about our discernment is:

The most important thing we want the congregation to understand about what comes next is:

If you can say those three things clearly, you are ready.

Leader's Note

There is a subtle temptation at this point in a search.

The Search Committee has lived with uncertainty for months. Now it has finally reached a recommendation.

Relief arrives, and relief can quickly become certainty.

The committee begins saying things like:

“We found our pastor.”

Perhaps.

But what you have actually found is a person with whom you believe faithful ministry may be possible.

That is enough.

You do not need to turn the candidate into the answer to the congregation's problems to recommend them enthusiastically.

Doing so places an impossible burden on the new pastor before ministry has even begun.

Tell the congregation what you actually discovered.

Tell them about the stories you heard.

Tell them about the patterns that emerged.

Tell them about the gifts you believe matter for this congregation and community.

Tell them why the committee became hopeful about ministry together.

Then trust the congregation to encounter the candidate.

A Search Committee's strongest recommendation is not:

“Trust us. We found the right person.”

It is:

“We have listened carefully, asked difficult questions, allowed ourselves to be questioned in return, prayed, reflected, and paid attention. Through that process, we have come to believe that this candidate and this congregation should take the next faithful step together.”

That is a recommendation worthy of the discernment that produced it.

FM 10.2

Terms of Call Checklist

Purpose

A call is theological. It is also practical.

Compensation, housing, benefits, time away, professional expenses, moving costs, and expectations about work are not administrative details sitting outside the discernment of call. They shape the conditions under which pastor and congregation will share ministry.

By this stage, the Search Committee and candidate should not be deciding whether to enter ministry together by bargaining over every provision.

Neither should either party discover significant assumptions after the call has been extended.

The purpose of this checklist is to make sure the proposed Terms of Call are:

- clear
- complete
- understood by both candidate and congregation
- consistent with applicable presbytery requirements
- financially sustainable
- honest about expectations
- ready for whatever approvals are required

Use the current forms and requirements of your presbytery or governing body. This checklist is a conversation guide, not a substitute for them.

A healthy call begins with clear expectations.

---

1. Before Discussing Terms

Confirm:

☐ Committee knows who has authority to negotiate Terms of Call

☐ Current presbytery compensation requirements have been obtained

☐ Required Terms of Call forms have been obtained

☐ Congregational budget has been reviewed

☐ Session/governing body understands the proposed financial commitment

☐ Candidate knows who will discuss Terms of Call with them

☐ Committee understands which provisions require approval beyond the Search Committee

Person responsible for coordinating Terms of Call:

Presbytery/judicatory contact:

Current forms obtained:

☐ Yes

☐ No

---

2. Position

Position title:

Position is:

☐ Full-time

☐ Part-time

If part-time, percentage or expected hours:

Anticipated start date:

Other position-specific requirements:

Confirm that candidate and congregation mean the same thing when they describe the position.

3. Effective Salary

Record the compensation categories required by your presbytery.

Cash salary:

$_____

Housing allowance:

$_____

Manse provided:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Other compensation counted as effective salary under applicable requirements:

$_____

Total effective salary:

$_____

Presbytery minimum:

$_____

☐ Meets applicable minimum requirements

☐ Presbytery approval required

☐ Further clarification needed

Do not assume the candidate understands how each component is treated for pension, tax, or presbytery purposes.

---

4. Housing

Housing arrangement:

☐ Housing allowance

☐ Manse

☐ Other: _____

If housing allowance:

Annual housing allowance:

$_____

Candidate understands that appropriate designation must occur through the proper governing body:

☐ Yes

If a manse is provided:

☐ Candidate has seen the manse

☐ Condition of manse discussed

☐ Utilities responsibility clarified

☐ Maintenance responsibility clarified

☐ Lawn/grounds responsibility clarified

☐ Furnishings clarified

☐ Major repairs responsibility clarified

☐ Pets addressed if necessary

☐ Moving-in expectations clarified

Other agreements:

Housing can become a source of unnecessary conflict when assumptions remain unstated. State them.

---

5. Manse Equity, If Applicable

If the pastor will live in a church-owned manse, determine whether your presbytery or congregation provides a manse-equity contribution.

☐ Applicable

☐ Not applicable

Annual contribution:

$_____

Method of payment:

Recipient/account arrangement:

Presbytery policy reviewed:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Questions remaining:

---

6. Pension and Benefits

Use the current requirements of the denomination and presbytery.

Confirm:

☐ Required pension/benefits participation identified

☐ Congregation understands employer cost

☐ Candidate understands coverage

☐ Effective date established

☐ Any optional coverage discussed

Required plan:

Congregational cost:

$_____

or

_____ %

Optional benefits:

Questions requiring clarification:

Do not estimate benefits from an old pastoral call. Verify current requirements.

---

7. Medical Coverage

If not already included above:

Medical coverage arrangement:

Coverage begins:

Family/dependent coverage:

Congregational responsibility:

Candidate responsibility:

Any transition between current and new coverage:

---

8. Vacation

Annual vacation:

__ weeks

or

__ days

Clarify:

☐ Whether Sundays are included

☐ How vacation is requested

☐ Whether unused vacation carries forward

☐ Maximum carryover, if applicable

☐ Whether vacation is prorated in the first year

Agreement:

A “week” can mean different things to different people. Define it.

9. Continuing Education / Study Leave

Annual study leave:

__ weeks

or

__ days

Annual continuing education allowance:

$_____

Clarify:

☐ What expenses may be reimbursed

☐ Approval process

☐ Whether unused funds accumulate

☐ Maximum accumulation

☐ Whether unused study-leave time carries forward

☐ Reporting expectations

Agreement:

Continuing education is not vacation. It is part of sustaining and developing pastoral leadership.

10. Sabbatical

Congregational/presbytery policy provides for sabbatical:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Eligibility after:

__ years

Length:

Funding provisions:

Congregational coverage during sabbatical:

Policy reviewed with candidate:

☐ Yes

☐ No

If the congregation does not have a sabbatical policy, do not promise provisions that have not been authorized.

---

11. Professional Expenses

Identify what the congregation considers a reimbursable ministry expense.

Possible categories:

☐ Mileage

☐ Professional travel

☐ Meals related to ministry

☐ Conferences

☐ Books

☐ Professional memberships

☐ Technology

☐ Cell phone

☐ Internet

☐ Hospitality

☐ Other: _____

Annual professional expense budget:

$_____

Reimbursement procedure:

Documentation required:

Professional expenses are generally not compensation. Keep the categories clear.

---

12. Automobile and Mileage

Arrangement:

☐ IRS-rate mileage reimbursement

☐ Fixed automobile allowance

☐ Congregational vehicle

☐ Included in professional expenses

☐ Other: _____

Annual budget/allowance:

$_____

What travel qualifies?

Reimbursement procedure:

Clarify expectations about extensive travel if the congregation serves a large geographic area.

13. Technology

Congregation provides:

☐ Computer

☐ Tablet

☐ Cell phone

☐ Cell phone allowance

☐ Internet allowance

☐ Software subscriptions

☐ Office equipment

☐ Other: _____

Equipment belongs to:

☐ Congregation

☐ Pastor

☐ Depends on item

Replacement schedule or policy:

Data and records expectations clarified:

☐ Yes

☐ No

---

14. Moving Expenses

Congregation will provide:

☐ Full moving expenses

☐ Moving expenses up to a limit

☐ Fixed moving allowance

☐ No moving expenses

Maximum:

$_____

Clarify whether covered expenses include:

☐ Moving company

☐ Packing

☐ Storage

☐ Travel

☐ Lodging during move

☐ Vehicle transportation

☐ Other: _____

Reimbursement/payment procedure:

Receipts required:

☐ Yes

☐ No

A move across town and a move across the country are very different expenses. Do not leave this vague.

---

15. Relocation Expenses Beyond the Move

Discuss if relevant:

☐ House-hunting travel

☐ Temporary lodging

☐ Storage

☐ Travel before start date

☐ Closing or relocation assistance permitted by policy

☐ Other: _____

Agreement:

Requires additional approval:

☐ Yes

☐ No

---

16. Start Date

Proposed start date:

Consider:

☐ Candidate's current call responsibilities

☐ Appropriate notice

☐ Moving time

☐ Housing availability

☐ Presbytery/judicatory approval

☐ Family needs

☐ School calendar, if relevant to candidate

☐ Congregational calendar

☐ Vacation already scheduled

☐ Other: _____

Final agreed start date:

Do not pressure the candidate to leave one ministry poorly in order to begin yours quickly. Ending well matters too.

---

17. Weekly Rhythm

Terms of Call may not specify every aspect of a pastor's schedule, but major assumptions should be discussed.

Expected workweek:

Regular day(s) off:

Expectations regarding evenings:

Expectations regarding Saturdays:

Sunday responsibilities:

Flexibility understood:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Pastoral ministry does not fit neatly into office hours. That is not the same as being available all the time.

18. Office Expectations

Congregation expects pastor in the office:

Candidate anticipates:

Remote work expectations:

Community-based work expectations:

Agreement:

Do not use “office hours” as shorthand for faithfulness. Clarify what presence actually serves the ministry.

19. Pastoral Care Expectations

Discuss broad expectations.

Congregation currently expects:

Candidate understands pastoral care as:

Particular expectations regarding:

Hospitals:

Homebound members:

Emergencies:

Funerals:

Congregational caregiving:

Areas requiring further conversation:

The goal is not to write every pastoral responsibility into the Terms of Call, but to discover significant mismatches before the call.

---

20. Preaching and Worship Expectations

Expected preaching frequency:

Expected worship leadership:

Multiple services:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Seasonal/additional services:

Communion responsibilities:

Baptisms, weddings, funerals:

Worship planning expectations:

_____

_____

Other clergy/worship leadership available:

_____

_____

_____

21. Staff Supervision

Candidate will serve as:

☐ Head of staff

☐ Supervisor of designated staff

☐ Colleague without supervisory authority

☐ Other: _____

Staff supervised:

_____

_____

Personnel responsibilities:

_____

_____

Evaluation process:

_____

Personnel committee relationship:

_____

_____

Candidate understands current staff structure:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do not allow the candidate to discover after arrival that “head of staff” means something different from what they understood.

---

22. Session / Governing Body Expectations

Clarify:

Moderating responsibilities:

Meeting frequency:

Committee involvement:

Leadership expectations:

Administrative expectations:

Relationship with clerk/chair:

---

23. Community and Mission Expectations

Congregation hopes the pastor will engage:

Existing partnerships:

Community responsibilities associated with the position:

Candidate's understanding:

Mission expectations should reflect partnership.

Avoid assuming that the new pastor will personally take responsibility for every congregational ministry.

---

24. Presbytery and Wider Church Responsibilities

Discuss expectations regarding participation in:

☐ Presbytery

☐ Committees/commissions

☐ General Assembly or broader denominational service

☐ Ecumenical relationships

☐ Community organizations

☐ Continuing denominational responsibilities

☐ Other: _____

Congregation's expectations:

Candidate's current commitments:

Agreement:

Service to the wider church is part of pastoral vocation, not necessarily time away from "real ministry."

---

25. Outside Professional Activities

Candidate currently participates in:

☐ Teaching

☐ Coaching

☐ Counseling

☐ Writing

☐ Consulting

☐ Speaking

☐ Denominational work

☐ Community leadership

☐ Other: _____

Expected to continue?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ To be determined

Time implications:

Compensation implications:

Approval required?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Agreement:

Clarify outside activities rather than allowing assumptions to develop later.

---

26. Other Existing Commitments

Candidate has commitments that may continue into the new call:

Congregation understands:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Duration:

Effect on schedule:

Agreement:

---

27. Leave Provisions

Review applicable policies for:

☐ Sick leave

☐ Parental leave

☐ Family leave

☐ Bereavement leave

☐ Disability leave

☐ Military leave

☐ Other required leave

Applicable policy:

Candidate has received policy:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do not invent leave provisions in the search process. Use current denominational, presbytery, congregational, and legal requirements.

28. Annual Review

Pastor's Terms of Call reviewed:

☐ Annually

☐ Other: _____

Responsible body:

Compensation review occurs:

Ministry review/evaluation occurs:

Are these separate processes?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Candidate understands the process:

☐ Yes

☐ No

An annual review should not come as a surprise eleven months into ministry.

---

29. Cost-of-Living and Compensation Review

Clarify whether there is:

☐ Automatic cost-of-living adjustment

☐ Annual compensation review

☐ Presbytery minimum adjustment

☐ Merit adjustment

☐ No automatic adjustment

☐ Other: _____

Process:

Do not imply future compensation increases the congregation has not authorized.

30. Financial Sustainability

Before finalizing the Terms of Call, ask:

Is the congregation able to sustain this call?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Uncertain

Has the full cost of compensation and benefits been calculated?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Have moving and startup costs been included?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Has the session/governing body reviewed the financial implications?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the budget depend upon unrealistic assumptions about future giving or growth?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

What needs to be addressed?

Do not build a pastoral call on financial hopes that have not been named honestly.

---

31. Do Not Make the Pastor Responsible for Funding the Call

Avoid assumptions such as:

“The salary is a stretch, but once the new pastor brings in new members, we'll be fine.”

That is not a financial plan.

Ask:

Can we afford the proposed Terms of Call with reasonably foreseeable resources?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If not, what must change before the call is extended?

A pastor should not arrive responsible for generating the revenue necessary to pay their own compensation.

---

32. Reimbursable Expenses Are Not Salary

Make sure the congregation distinguishes between:

Compensation

Benefits

Reimbursable professional expenses

One-time relocation/startup expenses

This matters for budgeting, taxation, pension calculations, and honest communication.

Use current professional advice and denominational guidance where required.

---

33. What Is Written—and What Is Merely Assumed?

Review every significant agreement.

Written into Terms of Call:

Written in another policy:

Discussed but not written:

Assumed but never discussed:

The last category deserves attention.

34. Search for Hidden Expectations

Ask committee members individually:

“What do I assume the new pastor will do that we have never actually discussed?”

Assumption:

Another:

Another:

Now compare.

You may discover that the committee itself does not share the same expectations.

---

35. Search for Candidate Assumptions

Ask the candidate:

“Is there anything you are assuming about the position, schedule, congregation, staff, compensation, or way we will work together that we have not explicitly discussed?”

Candidate assumption:

Clarification:

This may be one of the most useful conversations in the Terms of Call process.

---

36. What Is Negotiable?

Before discussing changes, know the committee's authority.

Fixed by presbytery/policy:

Authorized range:

Negotiable:

Requires session/governing-body approval:

Requires presbytery/judicatory approval:

Do not promise what you do not have authority to give.

37. If the Candidate Requests a Change

Requested change:

Do not interpret negotiation as lack of commitment.

Ask:

“Help us understand what is important about this provision for you.”

Candidate's concern:

Committee response:

Further approval needed:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Final agreement:

Terms of Call are part of mutual discernment.

---

38. If the Congregation Cannot Meet a Request

Say so plainly.

Avoid:

“We'll probably be able to work something out later.”

Instead clarify:

Request:

What congregation can provide:

What congregation cannot provide:

Alternative, if any:

A difficult truth before the call is healthier than a broken promise afterward.

39. Candidate Review of Complete Terms

Before final recommendation or approval, provide the candidate with the complete proposed Terms of Call.

Candidate has reviewed:

☐ Compensation

☐ Housing

☐ Benefits

☐ Vacation

☐ Study leave

☐ Continuing education

☐ Professional expenses

☐ Moving expenses

☐ Sabbatical provisions

☐ Leave policies

☐ Start date

☐ Position expectations

☐ Other: _____

Candidate questions:

Questions resolved:

☐ Yes

☐ No

40. Congregational Authorization

Determine what the congregation must formally approve.

Congregational meeting required:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Terms presented to congregation include:

Who presents them?

Required vote/action:

Documents required:

Follow the current requirements of your governing documents and presbytery.

41. Presbytery / Judicatory Approval

Required review:

_____

Responsible body:

_____

Documents required:

_____

_____

Submission deadline:

_____

Person responsible:

_____

Approval received:

☐ Yes

☐ Pending

Conditions, if any:

_____

_____

Do not assume congregational approval completes the call process.

_____

42. Final Terms of Call Summary

Candidate:

_____

Position:

Effective date:

Cash salary:

$_____

Housing:

$_____

or

☐ Manse

Other effective salary:

$_____

Pension/benefits:

Vacation:

Study leave:

Continuing education:

$_____

Professional expenses:

$_____

Automobile/mileage:

Moving expenses:

Sabbatical:

Other provisions:

---

43. Final Agreement Check

Before proceeding:

Candidate understands the complete Terms of Call.

☐ Yes

Candidate has had opportunity to ask questions.

☐ Yes

Search Committee understands the Terms of Call.

☐ Yes

Session/governing body understands the financial commitment.

☐ Yes

Congregation can sustain the commitment.

☐ Yes

Required denominational minimums are met.

☐ Yes

Necessary approvals have been identified.

☐ Yes

No significant verbal promises exist outside the written agreement.

☐ Yes

Start date is understood.

☐ Yes

Moving arrangements are understood.

☐ Yes

Significant ministry expectations have been discussed.

☐ Yes

If any answer is no, resolve it before proceeding.

---

44. The “No Surprises” Conversation

Before finalizing the Terms of Call, ask both candidate and committee:

Is there anything about compensation, benefits, schedule, responsibilities, family considerations, moving, staff relationships, congregational expectations, or beginning ministry that could surprise the other party after the call?

Candidate:

_____

_____

Committee:

_____

_____

Anything requiring clarification:

This conversation may prevent problems no contract can solve later.

45. What Belongs in Beginning Ministry Together?

Not everything belongs in Terms of Call.

Some matters are better carried into the first months of ministry.

Matters to revisit after arrival:

Early covenant conversations:

Staff conversations:

Session conversations:

Expectations to review after six months:

Do not try to contract your way out of the need to build a relationship.

46. Final Question for the Candidate

Ask:

“Do these Terms of Call provide what you need to enter this ministry with freedom, energy, and appropriate support?”

Candidate response:

Anything we need to hear more fully:

47. Final Question for the Congregation

Ask:

“Can we make these commitments faithfully—not merely on the day we call this pastor, but throughout the ministry we are asking them to share with us?”

Response:

Any concern:

A Terms of Call document is a promise. Do not make promises the congregation does not intend to keep.

Leader's Note

It can feel almost unspiritual to move from prayerful discernment to salary, housing, vacation, mileage, and moving expenses. It isn't.

Money tells the truth about relationships remarkably quickly. So do expectations about time.

A congregation may say that it values the pastor's family and then quietly expect the pastor to be available seven days a week.

It may say that continuing education matters and then treat study leave as vacation.

It may provide a professional expense allowance and later speak about it as though it were extra compensation.

A candidate can bring assumptions too: about office hours, staff supervision, flexibility, housing, outside work, or how quickly compensation will increase.

None of these necessarily indicates bad faith. Most are simply things nobody thought to say aloud.

That is why this conversation matters.

The goal is not to anticipate every circumstance that might arise during a pastoral relationship. You cannot.

The goal is to begin without preventable misunderstandings.

Write down what needs to be written down.

Clarify what needs to be clarified.

Do not make promises you cannot keep.

Do not ask the candidate to rely on promises nobody has authority to make.

Do not confuse generosity with vagueness.

Clear Terms of Call do not diminish trust. They give trust somewhere solid to begin.

Once the terms are clear, put the checklist away.

The real work ahead will not be governed by a compensation form. It will be the work of learning how to become pastor and congregation together.

FM 10.3

Extending the Call Conversation

Purpose

There comes a moment when months of searching, interviewing, listening, and discernment become a conversation between people.

The Search Committee has completed its discernment.

The Terms of Call have been discussed.

The necessary procedural steps are clear.

Now someone needs to speak with the candidate and say:

We would like to invite you to take the next step toward becoming our pastor.

This conversation should feel neither like a business transaction nor a dramatic surprise.

It is the culmination of a relationship developing throughout the search.

The committee should communicate its decision clearly, say why it reached that decision, make room for the candidate's response, and explain what happens next.

The purpose is not to pressure the candidate into saying yes.

The candidate is still discerning.

Extending a call is an invitation to shared ministry, not a demand for an immediate answer.

---

1. Know Exactly What You Are Extending

Before making the call, confirm what your denominational process permits you to say.

Depending upon your polity, the Search Committee may be:

☐ Recommending the candidate

☐ Inviting the candidate to become the final candidate

☐ Inviting the candidate to a candidating weekend

☐ Presenting agreed Terms of Call

☐ Asking the candidate to accept a call contingent upon congregational action

☐ Taking another formal step: _____

Be precise.

Do not tell the candidate:

“You are our new pastor.”

if additional congregational, presbytery, or other approval is required.

What we are authorized to extend:

What remains contingent upon:

---

2. Complete the Necessary Work First

Before contacting the candidate:

☐ Committee discernment is complete

☐ Required committee action has occurred

☐ FM 9.8 — Discernment Before Recommendation completed

☐ FM 10.1 — Preparing to Recommend a Candidate completed

☐ FM 10.2 — Terms of Call Checklist completed

☐ Proposed Terms of Call are clear

☐ Candidate knows the proposed Terms

☐ Necessary session/governing-body action completed

☐ Presbytery/judicatory procedures confirmed

☐ Confidentiality requirements understood

☐ Next procedural steps identified

Anything still unresolved:

Do not create excitement around an invitation you are not yet authorized to make.

---

3. Decide Who Will Make the Call

Choose someone who has developed a good relationship with the candidate and can speak for the committee.

Usually:

☐ Committee chair

☐ Committee vice-chair

☐ Committee liaison to candidate

☐ Two committee members together

☐ Other: _____

Person making the call:

Others participating:

One clear voice is usually better than a conference call filled with committee members awaiting the candidate's reaction.

---

4. Arrange the Conversation

Whenever possible, do not make this an unexpected call while the candidate is:

- driving

- preparing for worship
- caring for children
- in the church office
- between meetings
- unable to speak privately

Contact the candidate and arrange a time.

For example:

“We have completed an important stage in our discernment and would like to talk with you. When would you have some private time for a conversation?”

Date:

Time:

Method:

☐ Phone

☐ Video

☐ In person

Candidate will have privacy:

☐ Yes

☐ Confirmed as well as reasonably possible

---

5. Prepare What You Want to Say

Do not improvise the most important sentence of the search.

Before the conversation, write down:

What we are inviting the candidate to do:

Why we are extending the invitation:

What we especially want the candidate to hear:

What happens next:

You do not need a script.

You need clarity.

---

6. Begin With the Decision

Do not make the candidate endure ten minutes of suspense.

Avoid:

“Well, we've had a lot to think about…”

“There were many things we appreciated…”

“The committee met last night for quite a while…”

Say what you called to say.

For example:

“Our Search Committee has completed its discernment, and we are very pleased to invite you to move forward with us toward a call as our next pastor.”

Then stop.

Let the candidate receive it.

---

7. Tell Them Why

Do not simply say:

“The vote was unanimous.”

That tells the candidate little.

Tell them what you recognized.

We want to name these patterns:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

You might say:

“As we looked back across our conversations, several things kept appearing…”

Then describe them.

Perhaps:

- the way the candidate listens before acting
- theological depth
- pastoral presence
- ability to develop other leaders
- curiosity about the community
- capacity to live faithfully with differences
- imagination for mission
- collaborative leadership

- willingness to learn
- honesty about failure
- something particular to this candidate

Make the invitation personal.

---

8. Connect the Candidate With the Congregation's Vocation

The strongest invitation is not:

“We think you are a wonderful pastor.”

It is:

“We can imagine ministry together.”

Complete:

We believe your gifts for _____ connect with our congregation's call to _____.

Another connection:

A possibility we have begun to imagine together:

This is the theological heart of the conversation.

---

9. Speak About Partnership

Avoid describing everything the candidate will do for the congregation.

Not:

“We need you to rebuild our youth program, increase attendance, strengthen stewardship, improve pastoral care, and bring in young families.”

Instead:

“We believe there is meaningful work for us to enter together.”

Candidate brings:

_____

_____

Congregation brings:

_____

_____

Together we might:

_____

_____

A call is not the hiring of a religious problem-solver.

_____

10. Let the Candidate Respond

After extending the invitation, stop talking.

The candidate may:

- laugh
- cry
- become quiet
- express excitement
- ask questions

- say they need time
- sound less enthusiastic than you expected

Do not interpret the first reaction too quickly.

Ask:

“What are you experiencing as you hear this?”

or simply:

“How does this feel to you?”

Candidate response:

Listen.

---

11. Do Not Demand an Immediate Yes

Even if the candidate has repeatedly expressed enthusiasm, the actual invitation changes the situation.

Now the possibility is real.

The candidate may need to:

- pray
- speak with a spouse or family
- consider relocation
- review financial implications
- speak with trusted advisers
- reflect on leaving a current congregation
- consider children or schooling
- revisit Terms of Call
- discern what saying yes will require

That is responsible discernment.

Give it room.

---

12. Ask What the Candidate Needs

Ask:

“What do you need in order to complete your discernment?”

Candidate needs:

_____

_____

Possible needs:

☐ Time

☐ Prayer

☐ Conversation with spouse/family

☐ Additional Terms of Call clarification

☐ Housing information

☐ Community information

☐ Another conversation with committee

☐ Presbytery/judicatory clarification

☐ Start-date discussion

☐ Other: _____

Respond to what is actually needed.

---

13. Agree on a Response Time

Do not say:

“Take all the time you need.”

The search still needs a timeline.

Nor should you say:

“We need an answer tomorrow.”

unless a genuine procedural necessity requires it.

Agree together.

Candidate expects to respond by:

_____

_____

Is that timeline reasonable for both parties?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Follow-up conversation scheduled:

_____

_____

A clear timeline reduces anxiety for everyone.

---

14. If the Candidate Is Ready to Say Yes

The candidate may respond immediately:

“Yes. I am ready.”

Receive that with gratitude.

But still clarify:

What does “yes” mean at this stage of the process?

_____

_____

What formal actions remain?

_____

What may now be communicated?

What must remain confidential?

Next contact:

Excitement does not eliminate procedure.

15. If the Candidate Says, “I Think So”

Do not convert uncertainty into acceptance.

Ask:

“What still needs to become clear for you?”

Candidate uncertainty:

Is it something we can help clarify?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What will we do?

Allow the candidate to reach their own yes.

---

16. If the Candidate Needs Time

Respond generously.

You might say:

“Of course. We want your decision to emerge from the same kind of careful discernment we have tried to practice. Let's agree on when we will talk again.”

Then establish:

Response date:

Additional information requested:

Person responsible for providing it:

Next conversation:

Do not call repeatedly during the discernment period.

Give the candidate room.

---

17. If the Candidate Has Additional Questions

Welcome them.

The candidate may ask about:

☐ Congregational expectations

☐ Staff

☐ Session

☐ Finances

☐ Housing

☐ Community

☐ Schools

☐ Worship

☐ Mission

☐ Theology

☐ Previous conflict

☐ Terms of Call

☐ Start date

☐ Moving

☐ Other: _____

Question:

_____

_____

Response:

_____

_____

If you do not know:

“I don't know, but we will find out.”

Then do.

18. If a Question Reveals a New Concern

Do not become defensive.

The candidate's final discernment may surface something not previously discussed.

Candidate concern:

_____

_____

Ask:

“Help us understand what concerns you.”

What we heard:

_____

_____

Does this require:

☐ Information

☐ Clarification

☐ Negotiation

☐ Committee conversation

☐ Session action

☐ Presbytery consultation

☐ Further mutual discernment

☐ Other: _____

A late question is not necessarily a problem.

Sometimes a concern becomes visible only when the decision becomes real.

19. If Terms of Call Come Back Into the Conversation

The candidate may say:

“I am very interested, but there is one part of the Terms of Call I need to revisit.”

Do not interpret that as rejection.

Return to **FM 10.2 — Terms of Call Checklist**.

Provision:

Candidate request:

Why it matters:

Committee has authority to respond?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Additional approval required?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Next step:

Do not negotiate from anxiety.

---

20. Do Not Use Spiritual Pressure

Avoid statements such as:

“We really believe God told us you are supposed to be here.”

“We know God has called you to our church.”

“The Spirit was unanimous.”

“We hope you won't say no to God's call.”

These statements place the committee's discernment above the candidate's.

Instead:

“We have come to believe that God may be opening the possibility of ministry together, and we would like to invite you to continue discerning that with us.”

The candidate must remain free.

---

21. Do Not Use Emotional Pressure

Avoid:

“Everyone is counting on you.”

“The congregation will be devastated if you say no.”

“We don't know what we'll do if you decline.”

“You were our first choice.”

“We have been searching for so long.”

These may express genuine committee emotion.

They do not belong on the candidate's shoulders.

22. Do Not Create Artificial Urgency

Avoid:

“We need an answer before another candidate gets away.”

“We have to know tonight.”

“If you're really called here, you should know.”

Unnecessary pressure does not improve discernment.

If there is a legitimate deadline, explain it honestly.

Deadline:

Why it exists:

Transparency is different from pressure.

23. Do Not Bargain Against Another Congregation

If the candidate is discerning another call, resist competition.

Do not ask:

“What are they offering you?”

in order to win a bidding contest.

Instead ask:

“Is there anything about our proposed call that you need us to clarify as you discern?”

Candidate response:

The candidate is discerning vocation, not conducting an auction.

---

24. If the Candidate Is Considering Another Call

Ask:

“What timeline do you need for your discernment?”

and:

“Is there anything about our congregation or the possible call that remains unclear?”

Candidate timeline:

Information needed:

Our agreed response date:

Do not ask the candidate to reveal confidential details about another congregation's search.

---

25. If the Candidate Says No

Listen before responding.

Do not immediately try to persuade them.

Say something like:

“Thank you for telling us. We are disappointed because we have come to care about the possibility of ministry together, but we respect your discernment.”

Then, if appropriate:

“Would you be willing to tell us what led to your decision?”

Candidate response:

Listen for what the committee can learn.

Do not turn the goodbye into an exit interview.

---

26. A No Is Still Discernment

A candidate's no does not necessarily mean:

- the committee missed something
- the congregation failed
- the Terms were inadequate
- another church “won”
- the candidate misled you

The candidate may simply have discerned differently.

Return as needed to:

FM 7.1 — When a Candidate Withdraws

and

FM 7.3 — Processing Disappointment Together

Allow the committee to grieve before returning to résumés.

---

27. If the Candidate Says Yes

Celebrate.

Then clarify.

Candidate's acceptance:

☐ Verbal

☐ Written

☐ Other required form: _____

Date:

_____

Remaining contingencies:

_____

_____

Congregational action required:

_____

Presbytery/judicatory action required:

_____

Candidating weekend required:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Next step:

_____

_____

28. Confirm What Can Be Shared

Before anyone sends a text message:

Candidate has informed appropriate people in current ministry:

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not yet

Committee may tell:

_____

_____

Committee may not yet tell:

_____

_____

Public announcement may occur:

_____

Candidate has approved biographical information:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Candidate has approved photograph:

☐ Yes

☐ No

One enthusiastic committee member can break confidentiality for everyone.

Be explicit.

---

29. Communicate With the Whole Committee

After the conversation:

Who informs the committee?

How?

☐ Meeting

☐ Phone

☐ Secure email

☐ Other: _____

What may be shared?

What remains confidential?

Do not allow partial information to circulate informally.

---

30. If the Candidate Is Still Discerning

Tell the committee exactly that.

Not:

“It sounds like a yes.”

Not:

“They seemed really excited.”

Say:

“The candidate has received our invitation and will complete their discernment by .”

That is what you know.

Do not turn hope into fact.

---

31. Prepare for the Waiting

The days after extending the call may feel unusually long.

Committee members may want to:

- interpret the candidate's tone
- reread messages
- speculate
- contact the candidate
- wonder why they need so much time
- imagine a no

Resist the urge to interpret the waiting.

You have asked the candidate to discern.

Let them.

Person authorized to communicate with candidate:

_____

_____

Others will refrain from contacting candidate until:

_____

_____

32. If the Candidate Requests Another Conversation

Welcome it.

Ask:

“What would be most helpful for us to talk about?”

Topics:

Who should participate?

When?

Do not automatically reconvene the entire Search Committee.

Invite only the people needed for the conversation.

---

33. If the Candidate Wants to Speak With Someone Else

They may want another conversation with:

☐ Head of staff

☐ Staff member

☐ Clerk of session

☐ Session member

☐ Presbytery representative

☐ Community partner

☐ Former interim pastor, if appropriate and authorized

☐ Other: _____

Why?

Is the conversation appropriate?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Who will arrange it?

Mutual discernment continues until the call is entered.

---

34. If the Candidate Wants Another Visit

Ask what they need to experience.

Candidate wants to:

☐ See housing

☐ Explore neighborhoods

☐ Visit schools

☐ Meet staff again

☐ Visit community

☐ Worship again

☐ Meet session leadership

☐ Other: _____

Purpose:

_____

_____

Can this reasonably be arranged?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Plan:

_____

_____

Do not treat reasonable due diligence as lack of enthusiasm.

---

35. Consider the Candidate's Household

The call belongs to the pastor.

Its consequences may affect an entire household.

Give the candidate room to consider:

- relocation
- spouse/partner employment
- children's transitions
- housing
- caregiving responsibilities
- community
- financial implications

Do not interrogate the candidate about private family matters.

Recognize that a responsible decision may require time.

---

36. If the Candidate Asks, "Are There Any Concerns I Should Know About?"

Answer honestly.

Do not suddenly unload confidential committee deliberations.

But do not pretend the committee has never had a question.

You might say:

"We explored questions about _____, and those conversations helped us understand _____. We are recommending you with that understanding."

What could appropriately be shared?

What remains confidential?

A mature recommendation does not require pretending the candidate is flawless.

---

37. If the Candidate Asks, "Was the Committee Unanimous?"

Know in advance how your committee will respond.

Follow your agreed process and confidentiality practices.

Do not reveal individual votes or identify dissenting members unless your process specifically requires it.

Appropriate response:

The more important question is whether the committee has formally made the recommendation required by its process.

38. If the Candidate Asks, “Why Me?”

This deserves more than:

“You were the best candidate.”

Answer from the discernment.

We recognized:

We saw a connection with:

We began imagining:

We believe ministry together could:

Let the candidate hear the committee's hope.

39. If the Candidate Asks, “What Worries You?”

This is a healthy question for a candidate to ask.

Do not respond:

“Nothing!”

A thoughtful response might be:

“We know every new pastoral relationship has things to learn. We believe we will need particular attention around _____. We don't see that as a reason not to enter the relationship, but we do think it deserves honesty.”

Our appropriate response:

This conversation can become an early foundation for trust.

40. If the Candidate Asks, “What Will Be Hard About Serving This Church?”

Tell the truth.

We believe these realities will require attention:

The congregation is still learning:

We believe the candidate should know:

If the committee cannot answer this question, it may still be idealizing the congregation.

41. Ask the Candidate One More Question

Before ending, ask:

"Is there anything you still need us to know as we enter this next stage together?"

Then listen.

Candidate response:

Follow-up needed:

42. Confirm the Next Steps Out Loud

Before ending the conversation, summarize:

"Here is what I understand we have agreed…"

Candidate will:

Committee will:

Information to be provided:

Next conversation:

Response expected by:

Confidentiality remains:

Ask:

“Is that your understanding too?”

☐ Yes

☐ No

Clarify before ending.

43. Immediately After the Conversation

Record:

Candidate's response:

Questions raised:

Additional information requested:

Terms requiring clarification:

Agreed response date:

Next steps:

Confidentiality instructions:

Record it before memory turns impressions into facts.

44. Extending the Call Checklist

Before

☐ Committee discernment complete

☐ Appropriate authorization obtained

☐ Terms sufficiently clear

☐ Denominational process confirmed

☐ Person making call identified

☐ Conversation arranged

☐ Invitation language prepared

☐ Reasons for recommendation identified

☐ Next steps known

During

☐ Decision stated early

☐ Reasons for recommendation shared

☐ Congregational vocation connected with candidate gifts

☐ Candidate given room to respond

☐ Questions welcomed

☐ No pressure for immediate answer

☐ Response timeline agreed

☐ Next steps explained

☐ Confidentiality clarified

After

☐ Conversation documented

☐ Committee informed appropriately

☐ Requested information provided

☐ Candidate given space to discern

☐ Follow-up date honored

☐ Confidentiality maintained

---

45. A Simple Conversation Flow

When you need to remember the conversation without reading a script:

1. Say it.

We would like to move forward toward a call.

2. Say why.

Here is what we have come to recognize.

3. Connect it.

Here is why we believe your gifts and our congregation's vocation may belong together.

4. Stop.

Let the candidate respond.

5. Ask.

What do you need to complete your discernment?

6. Clarify.

Terms, questions, timing, process.

7. Agree.

Set the next step and response date.

8. Protect.

Confirm confidentiality.

That is enough.

---

46. After an Acceptance

Before rushing into public communication, take a moment as a committee.

You have crossed an important threshold.

We are grateful for:

_____

_____

We want to remember:

_____

_____

We promised ourselves during discernment that ministry together would require:

_____

_____

We want to carry that into the beginning:

_____

_____

Do not leave what you learned during the search behind simply because the candidate said yes.

_____

47. The First Promise

The Terms of Call contain formal promises.

Another promise is already being made.

The committee is demonstrating what kind of relationship this congregation intends to build.

Will you:

- speak clearly?
- tell the truth?

- honor boundaries?
- allow questions?
- resist pressure?
- keep commitments?
- communicate when you say you will?
- make room for discernment on both sides?

The candidate is learning the congregation through this conversation.

Make sure what they are learning is true.

Leader's Note

This may be the conversation the Search Committee has imagined from the beginning.

After months of profiles, interviews, questions, scenarios, meals, prayers, references, and committee meetings, someone finally gets to say:

We would like you to become our pastor.

Receive the moment with gratitude.

Do not rush it.

The candidate has been discerning too.

For the committee, the decision may have become clearer over weeks. The candidate may have felt the same movement, but an actual invitation changes the question.

Now there is a congregation to leave.

A house to sell or a lease to end.

A community to leave behind.

Relationships to grieve.

Perhaps a family to move.

A new congregation to trust.

A new place to learn.

A new ministry that exists so far mostly in imagination.

Give the candidate room to stand in that moment.

Tell them why you are calling them.

Not why they won.

Not why they were better than the other candidates.

Not because the committee was unanimous.

Tell them what you saw.

Tell them what you heard.

Tell them what kept appearing across the search.

Tell them where you see their gifts meeting the congregation's vocation.

Tell them what kind of ministry you have begun imagining together.

Then stop talking.

Let them receive the invitation.

A healthy call does not begin when a candidate is persuaded to say yes.

It begins when pastor and congregation are each free enough to say either yes or no—and, having listened carefully, discover that they are ready to say yes to one another.

FM 10.4

Candidate Discernment Timeline

Purpose

The Search Committee has extended its invitation.

Now the candidate needs room to discern.

This period can be surprisingly difficult. After months of work, the committee has reached clarity and naturally wants the candidate to reach the same place quickly.

But the committee's discernment and the candidate's discernment are not on the same timetable.

The candidate may be considering:

- leaving a congregation and people they love

- relocation
- spouse or family considerations
- housing
- finances
- children's needs
- professional commitments
- the proposed Terms of Call
- unfinished questions about the congregation
- whether they can genuinely imagine becoming pastor to these people

This resource gives that discernment enough time and structure without allowing the search to drift indefinitely.

Give the candidate room to discern, with a clear horizon.

---

1. Begin With an Agreed Timeline

At the conclusion of **FM 10.3 — Extending the Call Conversation**, the committee and candidate should agree on when the candidate expects to respond.

Invitation extended:

Date: _____

Candidate expects to respond by:

Date: _____

Follow-up conversation scheduled:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Primary committee contact:

_____

Candidate understands the timeline:

☐ Yes

Committee understands the timeline:

☐ Yes

Do not leave the conversation with:

“Just get back to us whenever you're ready.”

Clarity is kinder than indefinite waiting.

---

2. Determine What the Candidate Is Discerning

Ask:

“What do you need to consider before you can respond?”

Do not guess.

Candidate identified:

☐ Prayer and personal reflection

☐ Conversation with spouse/partner/family

☐ Leaving current congregation

☐ Relocation

☐ Housing

☐ Financial implications

☐ Terms of Call

☐ Start date

☐ Children's needs

☐ Spouse/partner employment

☐ Caregiving responsibilities

☐ Community

☐ Additional congregational information

☐ Additional conversation with committee

☐ Conversation with presbytery/judicatory

☐ Other: _____

Candidate told us:

_____
_____
_____

The committee does not need to solve every concern.

It does need to know what it can appropriately clarify.

_____

3. Distinguish Discernment From Information Gathering

Some things require reflection.

Others require answers.

Candidate needs to discern:

_____
_____

Candidate needs information about:

_____
_____

Candidate needs clarification about:

_____
_____

Candidate needs conversation about:

Respond promptly to information requests.

Do not try to accelerate discernment.

---

4. What Does the Committee Owe the Candidate?

During this period, the committee should:

☐ Provide requested information promptly

☐ Answer questions honestly

☐ Clarify Terms of Call

☐ Arrange appropriate additional conversations

☐ Explain procedural requirements

☐ Maintain confidentiality

☐ Respect the agreed timeline

☐ Give the candidate space

☐ Be available without hovering

Person responsible:

Information we need to provide:

By when:

---

5. What Does the Candidate Owe the Committee?

Mutual discernment also requires responsibility.

The candidate should:

☐ Communicate within the agreed timeline

☐ Raise significant remaining questions

☐ Identify needed clarification

☐ Be honest about reservations

☐ Inform the committee if more time becomes necessary

☐ Communicate a decision clearly

The committee may appropriately expect communication.

Giving someone room to discern does not require accepting unexplained silence.

---

6. A Typical Discernment Window

There is no universal number of days appropriate for every call.

The time should reflect the complexity of the decision.

Agreed discernment period:

__ days

Why this period seems appropriate:

Consider:

- complexity of relocation
- family considerations
- unresolved practical questions
- candidate's current ministry
- denominational deadlines
- congregational schedule
- whether Terms of Call are already settled
- whether another visit is needed

Avoid both extremes:

“We need an answer tomorrow.”

and

“Take as long as you want.”

---

7. Day 0 — Extend the Invitation

Date:

During FM 10.3 — Extending the Call Conversation:

☐ Invitation clearly extended

☐ Reasons for recommendation shared

☐ Candidate given room to respond

☐ Candidate questions heard

☐ Candidate needs identified

☐ Response date agreed

☐ Confidentiality clarified

☐ Next contact identified

Candidate's initial response:

_____

_____

Immediate follow-up needed:

_____

_____

_____

8. Days 1–2 — Provide What Was Promised

Do not make the candidate chase information.

We promised:

_____

_____

Person responsible:

_____

Sent/provided:

Date: _____

Possible information:

☐ Final proposed Terms of Call

☐ Benefits information

☐ Housing information

☐ Moving information

☐ Congregational documents

☐ Presbytery information

☐ Community information

☐ Staff information

☐ School/community resources requested by candidate

☐ Start-date clarification

☐ Other: _____

Everything promised has been provided:

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

Still needed:

---

9. Then Give the Candidate Space

Once requested information has been provided:

Stop.

Do not send:

"Just checking in…"

the next morning.

Do not have individual committee members contact the candidate.

Do not send additional material simply because someone thinks:

"This might help convince them."

The candidate knows the committee wants them.

Now allow them to listen.

---

10. Establish One Communication Channel

Primary committee contact:

Backup:

Other committee members should:

☐ Direct candidate communication through primary contact

☐ Avoid independent follow-up

☐ Avoid contacting candidate's spouse/family

☐ Avoid social-media communication about the call

☐ Maintain confidentiality

One communication channel reduces mixed messages.

---

11. Questions During the Discernment Period

If the candidate contacts the committee with a question:

Date:

Question:

Who can answer accurately?

_____

Response:

_____

_____

Does this require committee action?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does this change the discernment timeline?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

New agreed date:

_____

_____

12. When You Do Not Know the Answer

Say:

“We don't know. Let us find out.”

Then record:

Question:

_____

Person responsible:

_____

Source of accurate information:

_____

Response due:

_____

Response provided:

_____

Do not improvise answers about finances, benefits, polity, housing, or personnel matters.

_____

13. Additional Terms of Call Questions

If the candidate raises a Terms of Call issue:

Provision:

_____

Candidate question/request:

_____

_____

Can committee answer?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Requires additional authorization?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Referred to:

_____

Resolution:

Candidate understands resolution:

☐ Yes

Return to **FM 10.2 — Terms of Call Checklist** as needed.

---

14. If the Candidate Needs Another Conversation

Ask:

“What would you like to understand more fully?”

Purpose:

People needed:

Date:

Format:

☐ Phone

☐ Video

☐ In person

Questions to explore:

Do not automatically convene the entire committee.

Match the conversation to the need.

---

15. If the Candidate Wants Another Visit

What does the candidate need to experience?

☐ Housing

☐ Neighborhood

☐ Community

☐ Schools

☐ Church facilities

☐ Staff

☐ Session leadership

☐ Worship

☐ Community partners

☐ Other: _____

Purpose of visit:

Date:

Who will coordinate?

Does the response date need adjustment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

New date, if needed:

Another visit may be responsible discernment, especially when relocation is involved.

---

16. If the Candidate Wants to Talk With Their Spouse or Family

Do not ask:

“What does your spouse think?”

unless the candidate chooses to share.

Do not contact the spouse independently.

Do not treat family considerations as an obstacle to the candidate's call.

Ask:

“Is there information about the congregation or community that would be helpful as your household considers the transition?”

Information requested:

Provided:

---

17. If the Candidate Is Leaving a Current Congregation

Recognize the emotional complexity.

A candidate can be excited about your congregation and grieve leaving another one.

Those are not contradictory.

They may be considering:

- relationships
- unfinished ministry
- staff
- congregation members
- timing
- notice
- pastoral transitions
- how and when to tell people they love

Do not interpret grief about leaving as uncertainty about coming.

---

18. If the Candidate Is Discerning Another Call

If the candidate has told you they are considering another call:

Candidate has indicated another active discernment:

☐ Yes

Timeline discussed:

☐ Yes

Our agreed response date:

Do not ask for:

- the other congregation's identity unless the candidate volunteers it
- confidential details
- the other congregation's Terms of Call
- comparisons between congregations

Ask only what you need for your own process.

"Is our agreed timeline still workable for you?"

---

19. Do Not Enter a Competition

Avoid:

"What would it take for you to choose us?"

"Can we match their offer?"

"What do they have that we don't?"

If the candidate raises a legitimate concern about your Terms of Call or ministry expectations, address it on its own merits.

A call is not won.

It is discerned.

---

20. Committee Behavior During the Waiting Period

Committee members should:

☐ Pray

☐ Maintain confidentiality

☐ Complete necessary procedural work

☐ Prepare for either answer

☐ Trust the process

Committee members should not:

☐ Contact candidate independently

☐ Contact candidate's family

☐ Search social media for clues

☐ Interpret every delay

☐ Lobby candidate

☐ Increase the offer without authorization

☐ Begin public announcements

☐ Assume acceptance

☐ Assume rejection

Waiting is part of the work.

---

21. What Do We Do With Our Anxiety?

Name it.

I find myself worrying that:

What do I actually know?

What am I imagining?

Is there an action I need to take?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no:

Do not turn anxiety into communication.

---

22. The Midpoint Question

For a longer discernment period, a single agreed check-in may be appropriate.

Do this only if it was discussed with the candidate.

Midpoint check-in agreed:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Date:

Keep it simple:

“We wanted to make sure you have everything you need from us. Is there anything we can provide or clarify?”

Do not ask:

“So, what are you thinking?”

unless the candidate has agreed that this is the purpose of the conversation.

---

23. If There Is No Midpoint Check-In

Do not invent one because the committee is nervous.

Next agreed contact:

Until then:

☐ Candidate has what they need

☐ Committee will wait

---

24. If the Candidate Contacts You Early With a Yes

Do not say:

“We knew you would!”

Receive the decision.

Ask:

“Tell us where your discernment has led.”

Candidate response:

Then clarify:

Acceptance means:

Remaining formal actions:

Confidentiality:

Next step:

---

25. If the Candidate Contacts You Early With a No

Receive that too.

Do not immediately negotiate.

Ask, if appropriate:

“Would you be willing to share what became clear for you?”

Candidate response:

Is there something the committee needs to learn?

Is there anything requiring clarification?

Then honor the decision.

---

26. If the Candidate Asks for More Time

Do not automatically say yes.

Do not automatically say no.

Ask:

“What remains unresolved for you?”

Candidate needs more time because:

_____

_____

Is the reason understandable and specific?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Would additional time realistically help?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Committee can extend timeline:

☐ Yes

☐ No

New response date:

_____

What will happen during the extension?

_____

_____

An extension should have a purpose.

_____

27. If the Request for More Time Is Vague

If the candidate says:

“I just need more time.”

ask gently:

“Of course. Can you help us understand what you are still trying to discern so that we can determine an appropriate timeline together?”

What remains unresolved:

_____

_____

Additional information needed:

_____

_____

Agreed extension:

_____

Discernment can take time.

Indefinite indecision is different.

---

28. If the Candidate Stops Communicating

Do not panic after one missed call.

Communication matters.

Agreed response date:

Date now:

Candidate has missed agreed communication:

☐ Yes

☐ No

Primary contact should make one clear contact:

"We had agreed to talk on ___ and have not been able to connect. Please let us know when you are available so that we can understand where things stand."

Contact made:

Response:

If communication remains absent, consult the appropriate denominational or search-process leadership before making assumptions.

---

29. If New Information Emerges During This Period

Occasionally something significant changes.

Perhaps:

35. a Terms of Call provision changes
36. a financial issue emerges
37. a staff situation changes
38. a major congregational event occurs
39. the proposed start date becomes impossible

40. something material to the call becomes known

Ask:

Would a reasonable candidate consider this information significant to their decision?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

Tell them.

New information:

_____

_____

Candidate informed:

_____

Does timeline need adjustment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Mutual discernment requires current information.

_____

30. Do Not Hide Bad News Until After the Yes

The temptation may be:

“Let's not complicate things until they accept.”

Do not do that.

If something significant changes, the candidate deserves to know before deciding.

Trust built during the search can be damaged quickly by discovering:

“They knew this before I accepted.”

---

31. The Day Before the Agreed Response

Unless previously agreed, do nothing.

Do not send:

“Just reminding you that tomorrow is the deadline!”

The candidate knows.

Information complete:

☐ Yes

Questions answered:

☐ Yes

Committee ready to receive either answer:

☐ Yes

Then wait.

---

32. Response Day

Date:

Scheduled conversation:

Committee representatives:

Begin:

“Thank you for taking the time you needed. Tell us where your discernment has led.”

Then listen.

---

33. If the Answer Is Yes

Receive it before moving into logistics.

What candidate wants to say:

What committee wants to say:

Then confirm:

☐ Terms of Call understood

☐ Remaining contingencies understood

☐ Required congregational action understood

☐ Presbytery/judicatory process understood

☐ Announcement timing understood

☐ Current congregation confidentiality understood

☐ Candidating weekend, if applicable, understood

☐ Start-date process understood

Next step:

34. If the Answer Is No

Receive it graciously.

Candidate's decision:

Candidate chose to share:

Committee response:

Do not make the candidate manage your disappointment.

Thank them for the relationship and the seriousness with which they entered the process.

Then return to the appropriate Section Seven resources before restarting the search.

35. If the Answer Is Still “I Don't Know”

Ask:

“What remains unresolved?”

Remaining issue:

Then determine whether the answer requires:

☐ Information

☐ Another conversation

☐ Terms clarification

☐ More time

☐ A decision the candidate alone must make

☐ Recognition that the candidate is not ready to accept

Do not allow “I don't know” to become the permanent status of the search.

---

36. Candidate Discernment Timeline at a Glance

Invitation

Date: _____

Requested information due

Date: _____

Responsible person: _____

Additional conversation, if needed

Date: _____

Purpose: _____

Additional visit, if needed

Date: _____

Purpose: _____

Midpoint contact, if agreed

Date: _____

Purpose: _____

Candidate response

Date: _____

Formal next step

Date: _____

Action: _____

---

37. Communication Log

Date	Contact	Purpose	Follow-Up
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___

Keep the log factual.

Do not record interpretations such as:

“Candidate sounded hesitant.”

Record what was actually said.

---

38. Candidate Needs Checklist

Before the response date:

☐ Candidate has final Terms of Call

☐ Candidate has benefits information

☐ Housing questions answered

☐ Moving questions answered

☐ Start-date questions answered

☐ Congregational questions answered

☐ Staff questions answered

☐ Community questions answered

☐ Requested conversations completed

☐ Requested visit completed

☐ Denominational questions answered

☐ No promised information remains outstanding

Anything still needed:

_____

_____

_____

39. Committee Readiness Checklist

Before receiving the candidate's answer:

☐ We have respected the candidate's space

☐ We have communicated through the agreed person

☐ We have maintained confidentiality

☐ We have responded promptly when asked

☐ We have not pressured the candidate

☐ We have not interpreted silence as rejection

☐ We have not assumed acceptance

☐ We know what happens after a yes

☐ We know what happens after a no

☐ We are prepared to receive either answer graciously

---

40. The Committee's Discernment During the Waiting

The committee has already discerned its recommendation.

Do not reopen the search because waiting feels uncomfortable.

But use the time to remember:

What led us to this candidate:

What we recognized:

What we know ministry together would require:

What we cannot know yet:

What we are willing to entrust:

---

41. If the Candidate Says Yes: Preserve What You Learned

Before the committee shifts entirely into announcement and celebration, record:

Candidate's hopes for beginning ministry:

Candidate's concerns:

Congregational commitments we made:

Matters to revisit during the first months:

Expectations needing early conversation:

These belong in the transition into **Beginning Ministry Together**.

Do not lose them.

42. If the Candidate Says No: Preserve What You Learned

Record before returning to candidate profiles:

What this candidate helped us recognize about our congregation:

_____

_____

What became clearer about the call:

_____

_____

What became clearer about our expectations:

_____

_____

What we would do differently in the next conversation:

_____

_____

Then release the candidate before beginning again.

_____

43. A Prayer During the Waiting

God of beginnings and endings,

We have said what we needed to say.

We have offered what we are able to offer.

We have named the ministry we can imagine.

Now another person must listen.

Give us patience enough not to fill the silence.

Give this candidate freedom to listen honestly,
without carrying our anxiety or our expectations.

Give wisdom to those whose lives may be changed by this decision.

If there are questions we need to answer,
help us answer them truthfully.

If there are things we need to release,
help us release them freely.

And when the time comes for an answer,
give all of us grace to receive it.

Amen.

Leader's Note

Waiting for a candidate's answer may be one of the strangest moments in the search.

For months, the committee has been doing something.

Reading.

Interviewing.

Meeting.

Checking references.

Planning weekends.

Asking questions.

Praying.

Discerning.

Then the committee extends the invitation, and its most faithful action may be to do almost nothing.

That can be difficult.

Someone will want to call.

Someone will wonder why the candidate needs so much time.

Someone will interpret a delayed email.

Someone may suggest sending one more piece of information that demonstrates how wonderful the congregation is.

Resist the urge to manage the candidate's discernment.

You asked this person to consider something enormous.

Not simply:

Do you want this job?

But:

Can you imagine giving yourself to these people?

Can you imagine allowing these people to become your people?

Can you leave the people who are your people now?

Can you imagine making a life in this place?

Those questions deserve room.

Your responsibility during this time is simple.

Tell the truth.

Answer what needs answering.

Keep the promises you made.

Honor the agreed timeline.

Maintain confidentiality.

And give the candidate freedom.

The committee has spent the search learning that discernment cannot be forced.

That remains true while waiting for the answer you most hope to hear.

The freedom to say yes means very little unless there is also freedom to say no.

Give the candidate both.

Then, when the answer comes, you will know it was given freely.

FM 10.5

Communicating with Other Candidates

Purpose

When the Search Committee decides to move forward with one candidate, others may still be in the process.

Some may have submitted materials and never been interviewed.

Some may have had an initial conversation.

Some may have invested considerable time in multiple interviews.

A few may have begun imagining ministry with your congregation.

How the committee communicates with them matters.

A candidate no longer under consideration should not be left waiting because the committee is excited about someone else.

Nor should another candidate be kept "warm" as a backup in case the preferred candidate declines.

The principle is straightforward:

Once you know you are no longer discerning with a candidate, tell them promptly and graciously.

Use this guide with **FM 7.5 — Sample Candidate Communications**, **FM 10.3 — Extending the Call Conversation**, and **FM 10.4 — Candidate Discernment Timeline**.

1. Identify Every Active Candidate

Before extending a call, list every candidate still somewhere in the process.

Candidate A

Stage:

☐ Materials received
☐ Materials reviewed
☐ Initial conversation
☐ First interview
☐ Second interview
☐ Advanced discernment
☐ Interview weekend
☐ Other: _____

Candidate B

Stage:

☐ Materials received
☐ Materials reviewed
☐ Initial conversation
☐ First interview
☐ Second interview
☐ Advanced discernment
☐ Interview weekend
☐ Other: _____

Candidate C

Stage:

☐ Materials received
☐ Materials reviewed
☐ Initial conversation
☐ First interview
☐ Second interview
☐ Advanced discernment
☐ Interview weekend
☐ Other: _____

Add others as needed.

Do not assume someone else has already communicated with them.

2. Determine the Status of Each Candidate

For each person, ask:

Are we still genuinely discerning with this candidate?

Candidate:

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Unclear

If unclear:

What would have to happen for us to continue discernment with this person?

If the honest answer is:

Nothing. We have chosen to move in another direction.
then the candidate should be told.

3. Do Not Keep a Backup Candidate

One of the easiest ethical mistakes at this stage is:

“Let's not tell Candidate B yet in case Candidate A says no.”

That may feel prudent.

It is not mutual discernment.

If the committee has already decided that it would not choose Candidate B while Candidate A is available, ask:

Would we genuinely call Candidate B if Candidate A declined?

Answer:

☐ Yes, because discernment with Candidate B remains genuinely open
☐ No

If no, release Candidate B now.

Do not keep people available for your convenience.

4. Distinguish Parallel Discernment From Backup Planning

It is possible for a committee to be genuinely discerning with more than one candidate.

That is different from privately ranking candidates while allowing each to believe discernment remains equally open.

Ask:

Are we genuinely open to calling this candidate?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Are there still questions we are actively exploring?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Would we continue with this candidate even if another candidate disappeared from the process?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If the last answer is no, you are probably no longer discerning with them.

5. Do Not Wait Until the Preferred Candidate Accepts

If your committee has reached a clear no regarding another candidate, communicate it.

Do not wait for:

final acceptance from another candidate

congregational vote

completion of a candidating weekend

public announcement

presbytery action

unless your actual discernment with that other candidate remains genuinely open.

A person should not remain in a search because the committee wants insurance.

6. Match the Communication to the Relationship

The deeper the relationship, the more personal the communication should be.

Materials only

Usually:

☐ Email

Initial conversation

Usually:

☐ Personal email
☐ Phone if appropriate

One formal interview

Usually:

☐ Personal email
☐ Phone if relationship was substantial

Multiple interviews

Usually:

☐ Phone or video

Advanced discernment

Usually:

☐ Personal phone or video conversation

Interview weekend

Usually:

☐ Personal conversation first
☐ Written follow-up afterward

Do not end a significant relationship with a two-sentence form email.

7. Communicate Promptly

Once the decision is made:

Candidate:

Decision date:

Communication should occur by:

Person responsible:

A useful discipline:

If the committee has decided, the candidate should not spend another week wondering.

8. Decide Who Communicates

Whenever possible, let the candidate hear from the person with whom they have had the most consistent relationship.

Primary contact:

Candidate:

Backup:

Avoid having a new person appear only to deliver bad news.

Relationship matters at the ending too.

9. Be Clear Early in the Conversation

Do not begin with five minutes of compliments.

A candidate can hear the direction of the conversation and may spend those minutes waiting for the sentence they know is coming.

Say:

“Thank you for making time to talk. I wanted to speak with you personally because we have appreciated the conversations we have shared. After careful discernment, our committee has decided not to continue toward a call together.”

Then allow the candidate to respond.

Clarity is kindness.

10. Do Not Say, “We Chose Someone Else”

Even if true, that phrasing turns the process into a contest.

Avoid:

“We decided to go with another candidate.”

“Someone else was a better fit.”

“We selected our first choice.”

Prefer:

“Our committee has discerned that we should not continue toward a call together.”

This keeps the focus on the relationship being discerned rather than on ranking candidates.

11. Do Not Tell Them Where They Ranked

Avoid:

“You were our second choice.”

“It came down to you and one other person.”

“You were in our top three.”

“If this doesn't work out, we may come back to you.”

None of that serves the candidate.

If the relationship is ending, end it.

12. Do Not Leave False Hope

Be careful with:

“Maybe circumstances will change.”

“We'll keep your materials.”

“You never know what might happen.”

“Perhaps we'll talk again.”

If you have discerned no, communicate no.

Kindness does not require ambiguity.

13. Acknowledge What the Candidate Gave

Candidates invest:

time

thought

vulnerability

stories

prayer

hope

family conversation

preparation

Acknowledge that.

You might say:

“We are grateful for the openness with which you shared your ministry, your questions, and your hopes with us.”

or:

“Your conversations helped our committee understand our own congregation more clearly.”

Say only what is true.

14. Do Not Give Generic Praise That Contradicts the Decision

Avoid:

“You were absolutely perfect.”

followed by:

“But we are not continuing.”

Or:

“We couldn't imagine anyone better.”

Candidates know when praise has become ceremonial.

If you express appreciation, make it specific.

Something we genuinely valued:

Something we learned through this candidate:

15. If the Candidate Asks Why

Decide beforehand what can appropriately be shared.

Reason we can responsibly describe:

Information that remains confidential:

Candidate-specific feedback we can support:

Use language that remains focused on this call.

For example:

"As our conversations continued, we became less convinced that the leadership needs we identified for this particular season and the ministry that most clearly energizes you were aligned strongly enough for us to continue toward a call."

Do not turn the conversation into a performance review.

16. Do Not Manufacture Feedback

A candidate may ask:

"What could I have done differently?"

Do not invent feedback merely to satisfy the question.

You may say:

"I don't think there was a particular thing you should have done differently. This was not an interview you failed. Our discernment simply led us in another direction."

That may be the most truthful answer.

17. Do Not Offer Feedback Beyond Your Knowledge

Avoid:

"You need to become a stronger preacher."

when you heard one sermon.

Avoid:

“You don't connect well with people.”
when you met them through three Zoom calls.

Avoid:

“Your theology is too academic.”
when the issue was really congregational preference.

Speak only from what the committee has actually experienced.

18. If the Candidate Wants More Specific Feedback

Ask yourself:

Do we have something specific and useful to offer?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Is it based on repeated observation?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Is it relevant beyond our own preference?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Can we say it respectfully?
☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, share modestly.

If not, say:

“I don't think it would be fair for us to make a broad judgment about your ministry based on the limited context in which we have known you.”

19. If the Candidate Is Disappointed

They may say:

“I really thought this was moving toward a call.”
Do not contradict their experience.

You might respond:

“I understand why you felt hopeful. We were genuinely discerning with you, and we were hopeful too. Our discernment became clearer only as the process continued.”

That honors the reality of the relationship.

20. If the Candidate Is Hurt

Do not immediately defend the committee.

Useful responses:

“I am sorry this is painful.”

“I appreciate the seriousness with which you entered the process.”

“Thank you for telling me how you are receiving this.”

You do not need to make the hurt disappear.

Receive it respectfully.

21. If the Candidate Is Angry

Stay calm.

Listen.

Do not argue.

Candidate says:

Our response:

If the candidate challenges the decision:

“I understand that you see this differently. The committee has completed its discernment and decided not to continue.”

You do not need agreement about the decision to communicate it faithfully.

22. If the Candidate Tries to Reopen the Process

They may say:

“Could we have one more conversation?”

or:

“I think you misunderstood my answer.”

Before responding, know whether the committee's decision is final.

Decision is final:

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

“I appreciate your wanting to clarify that. The committee's discernment is complete, and we are not reopening the process.”

Do not create ambiguity because the conversation is uncomfortable.

23. If the Candidate Raises Significant New Information

Occasionally, a candidate may respond:

“I wish you had known…”

and share something genuinely material that the committee did not know.

Do not make a spontaneous decision.

New information:

Is it genuinely relevant to the reason for ending discernment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Does the committee need to hear it?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes:

Tell the candidate:

“Thank you. I don't want to respond to that on behalf of the committee without allowing the committee to consider it appropriately.”

Then follow your process.

This should be rare.

24. If the Committee Is Still Genuinely Discerning With Another Candidate

You may not yet be ending the relationship.

If you are continuing with multiple candidates, tell the truth about the timeline without sharing information about others.

You may say:

“Our committee's discernment is continuing. We expect to know more about our next steps by __.”

Do not say:

“We're waiting to hear what another candidate decides.”
The other candidate's discernment is confidential.

25. Do Not Reveal Another Candidate's Identity

Never tell a candidate:

who else is being considered

where another candidate currently serves

whether another candidate is male or female

whether another candidate has accepted

another candidate's Terms of Call

another candidate's interview performance

Each candidacy remains confidential.

26. Do Not Use One Candidate to Pressure Another

Avoid:

“We have another candidate waiting, so we need your answer.”
unless a legitimate agreed deadline exists and can be stated without revealing confidential information.

Likewise, do not tell rejected candidates:

“The person we chose accepted immediately.”
It serves no purpose.

27. Candidates Who Submitted Materials but Were Never Interviewed

Candidates who entered your process deserve closure.

Do not let their materials disappear into silence.

Candidate:

Materials received:

Decision:

Communication sent:

A simple personal email may be enough.

Use **FM 7.5 — Sample Candidate Communications**.

28. Candidates After an Initial Conversation

Acknowledge the relationship.

The message might say:

“Thank you for the conversation and for allowing us to learn more about your ministry. After continuing our discernment, we have decided not to move toward another interview.”

Person responsible:

Date:

Prompt communication allows the candidate to continue their own search without wondering.

29. Candidates After Several Interviews

Call.

By now, the candidate has invested substantially.

Date for conversation:

Person calling:

Primary message:

Appreciation we can honestly express:

Feedback we can appropriately offer if asked:

30. Candidates After an Interview Weekend

This requires particular care.

You welcomed them into your community.

They may have:

traveled

brought family

preached

met staff

met congregational leaders

explored housing

imagined living among you

Call personally.

Do not send:

“Thank you for visiting. We have decided to move in another direction.”
as the first communication.

The depth of relationship deserves a human ending.

31. When the Candidate Has Involved Their Family

Do not contact family members separately.

The candidate communicates the decision to their own household.

Candidate's family participated:

☐ Yes
☐ No

Any practical follow-up still owed:

☐ Travel reimbursement
☐ Other expenses
☐ Returned materials
☐ Other: _____
Complete those responsibilities promptly.

32. Expenses Still Belong to the Congregation

A no does not erase financial obligations.

Confirm:

☐ Travel reimbursement complete
☐ Lodging paid
☐ Meals handled
☐ Mileage paid
☐ Other approved expenses reimbursed

Amount outstanding:

$_____

Person responsible:

Payment date:

Do not make a released candidate chase the congregation for reimbursement.

33. Return or Dispose of Candidate Materials

Follow your confidentiality agreement and denominational procedures.

Candidate materials may include:

☐ Application/profile
☐ Résumé
☐ Statement of faith
☐ Sermon materials
☐ Interview notes
☐ Reference notes
☐ Background information
☐ Emails
☐ Other: _____

Required disposition:

Person responsible:

Completion date:

Do not retain candidate files casually.

34. Close Access to Shared Candidate Materials

If your committee used shared electronic folders:

☐ Candidate materials removed or archived according to policy
☐ Access restricted
☐ Personal downloads deleted if required
☐ Printed materials handled appropriately
☐ Reference notes secured or disposed of

Person responsible:

Search confidentiality continues after the candidate leaves the process.

35. What Do We Tell the Congregation?

Usually, say nothing about candidates the congregation never knew.

Do not announce:

“We interviewed five candidates.”
unless there is a particular reason and your process permits it.

Never disclose:

names

identifying details

reasons candidates were released

committee opinions

What may appropriately be said about the search process:

Keep the focus on the process, not confidential people.

36. What Do We Tell Staff?

If staff met a candidate who is no longer being considered:

Staff need to know:

Staff do not need to know:

A simple statement may be sufficient:

“Our discernment with that candidate has ended. Thank you for the hospitality you offered during the visit. Please continue to protect the confidentiality of the process.”

Do not turn staff into an audience for committee reasoning.

37. What Do We Tell Community Partners?

If a community partner met a confidential candidate:

“Our conversations with that candidate have concluded. Thank you for helping them understand our community. We ask that you continue to respect the confidentiality of the process.”

Nothing else is needed.

38. Communication Sequence

Once the committee's direction is clear, plan the order.

First:

Second:

Third:

Fourth:

For example:

Candidate being invited forward

Other active candidates

Appropriate session/presbytery communication

Staff or other participants as appropriate

Public communication when authorized

The precise order will depend on your process.

Plan it.

39. Do Not Let Public Announcement Reach a Candidate First

Before publicly announcing a final candidate, ask:

Every active candidate has been contacted:

☐ Yes

Every candidate with whom significant conversations occurred has received closure:

☐ Yes

Staff/participants who met other candidates have been informed appropriately:

☐ Yes

Only then proceed toward public announcement.

No candidate should learn they are no longer under consideration by seeing another candidate on your website.

40. The Same-Day Principle

When a public announcement is imminent, communicate with other active candidates before that announcement whenever possible.

Public announcement planned for:

Other candidates will be contacted by:

Person responsible:

Give people the dignity of hearing from you directly.

41. Candidate Communication Record

All active candidates have received appropriate communication:

☐ Yes

☐ No

42. Closing Conversation Notes

Candidate:

Date:

Person communicating:

Decision communicated:

Candidate response:

Feedback requested:
☐ Yes
☐ No
Feedback provided:

Follow-up needed:

Keep notes brief and factual.

43. When the Candidate Says, “Thank You”

Receive it.

Do not fill the space with explanations.

A simple:

“Thank you for the trust you placed in us and for the conversations we shared. We wish you well as your discernment continues.”

is enough.

44. When the Candidate Says Nothing

Silence may be disappointment.

Let it be silence.

You do not need to rescue the moment.

You might simply say:

“I know this may be difficult news to receive.”
Then wait.

45. When You Are Tempted to Say Too Much

Before the call, remember:

The candidate needs to know:

The decision.

Enough appreciation to know the relationship mattered.

Appropriate feedback if they request it and you can responsibly provide it.

Any practical next steps.

They do not need:

the entire committee discussion

who argued for them

who argued against them

how they ranked

details about another candidate

every concern anyone ever expressed

Say enough.

Then stop.

46. A Simple Ending Conversation

When you need a short guide:

1. Thank them.

“Thank you for the time and openness you have shared with us.”

2. State the decision.

“After careful discernment, our committee has decided not to continue toward a call together.”

3. Acknowledge the relationship.

“We have valued getting to know you and are grateful for what you shared with us.”

4. Listen.

Allow response.

5. Answer appropriate questions.

Stay truthful and modest.

6. Close graciously.

“We wish you every blessing as your discernment continues.”
That is enough.

47. Before Publicly Moving Forward

Complete:

All active candidates identified.

Committee has determined whether discernment remains genuinely open with each.

Candidates no longer under consideration have been informed.

Significant candidate relationships were ended personally.

No candidate is being kept as a backup.

Candidate confidentiality remains protected.

No information about other candidates was disclosed.

Outstanding expenses have been handled.

Candidate materials will be handled according to policy.

Staff and other participants have received only the information they need.

No candidate will learn the outcome through a public announcement.

48. A Prayer for Releasing Other Candidates

Gracious God,

we give thanks for each person who entered this search with us.

They offered stories, hopes, questions, time, and trust.

Some walked with us only briefly.

Others traveled with us for a considerable distance.

None was merely a résumé.

As our discernment now moves in another direction,
help us release each person with gratitude.

Keep us from ranking what should not be ranked,
from diminishing those we did not call,
or from holding someone in reserve because we are afraid.

Bless each candidate as their own discernment continues.

May the conversations we shared serve them as they have served us.

And help us complete these relationships with the same honesty, hospitality, and care with which we sought to begin them.

Amen.

Leader's Note

Search Committees often give careful attention to the candidate they are calling and far less to those they are not.

That is understandable.

The committee is excited.

There are Terms of Call to finish.

A candidating weekend to plan.

A congregation waiting for news.

It is easy for other candidates to become unfinished administrative business.

But they are people with whom you entered a relationship of discernment.

Some may have spent only an hour with you.

Others may have spent weeks imagining the possibility of becoming your pastor.

They may have talked with spouses or partners.

They may have researched your community.

They may have imagined where they would live.

They may have prayed about your congregation by name.

Honor that.

Resist one particularly tempting practice:

Do not keep another candidate waiting in case your preferred candidate says no.

There may be situations in which you are genuinely discerning with more than one person. That is legitimate.

But if your committee already knows that it would not choose one candidate unless another becomes unavailable, discernment with that person has ended.

Tell them.

People are not insurance policies against disappointment.

A faithful search should leave candidates—even those who are not called—with the sense that they were treated as people rather than applicants.

They should know:

You listened to me.

You were honest with me.

You did not use my hope to protect yourselves from uncertainty.

And when your discernment led elsewhere, you told me with dignity.

How you release candidates is part of the character of the call you are preparing to begin.

FM 10.6

Preparing the Congregation

Purpose

Once a Search Committee is ready to recommend a candidate, the congregation enters a new stage of the transition.

Until now, most members may have known little about the people being considered. The committee has carried the confidential work of reading, interviewing, listening, praying, checking references, and discerning.

Now the congregation needs to receive a candidate not as a résumé or a rumor, but as a person they may be called to welcome as pastor.

If the congregation is given too little information, anxiety fills the gap.

If it is given too much information, confidentiality may be compromised.

If the candidate is oversold, unrealistic expectations begin before ministry does.

If the congregation does not understand what a candidating weekend or congregational meeting means, the experience can feel hurried, confusing, or transactional.

The Search Committee's task is to help the congregation understand:

Where we are in the process.

What we have discerned.

What the congregation is being invited to do next.

How to meet this candidate faithfully.

Use this resource with **FM 10.1 — Preparing to Recommend a Candidate**, **FM 10.3 — Extending the Call Conversation**, **FM 10.4 — Candidate Discernment Timeline**, and **FM 10.5 — Communicating with Other Candidates**.

1. Know What the Congregation Is Being Asked to Do

Before communicating anything publicly, clarify the next formal step.

The congregation may be asked to:

meet the candidate

hear the candidate preach

attend a question-and-answer session

receive a Search Committee recommendation

approve Terms of Call

vote on the candidate

participate in another required denominational action

The congregation will be asked to:

This action is scheduled for:

What must happen before then:

Do not create public enthusiasm before the process is ready.

2. Confirm the Candidate Is Ready for Public Introduction

Before announcing the candidate:

Candidate has accepted the invitation to move forward

Candidate understands the next stage

Candidate has agreed to the timing

Candidate knows what will be shared publicly

Candidate has approved biographical information

Candidate has approved photograph if one will be used

Candidate has addressed appropriate communication with current congregation

Presbytery/judicatory requirements have been confirmed

Terms of Call are sufficiently clear

Other active candidates have been communicated with appropriately

Anything still unresolved:

Do not let the congregation learn something before the candidate is prepared for it to be known.

3. Decide What the Congregation Needs to Know First

The first communication should answer:

Who is the candidate?

Why is the Search Committee recommending them?

What happens next?

When will the congregation meet them?

What action will the congregation eventually take?

Keep the first communication clear.
There will be time for detail later.

4. Tell the Search Story Briefly

The congregation should know that the recommendation emerged from careful discernment.
It does not need a chronology of every meeting.
A brief description may include:
prayer
review of candidate materials
multiple interviews
conversations about theology and ministry
scenario questions
candidate questions
interview weekend
community engagement
reference conversations
committee reflection and discernment
Our process included:

What we want the congregation to understand about that process:

The point is not:

Look how hard we worked.

The point is:

This recommendation emerged from a careful process.

5. Tell the Story of Recognition

The congregation will be more interested in why the committee recommends the candidate than in how many interviews occurred.

Complete:

As our conversations continued, we consistently recognized…

We saw these gifts repeatedly:

We heard these convictions:

We became especially hopeful about:

We saw a connection between the candidate's gifts and our congregation's vocation in:

This is the heart of the recommendation.

6. Do Not Introduce the Candidate as the Answer to Every Problem

Avoid:

“This pastor will grow the church.”

“This candidate will bring back young families.”

“This is exactly the leader we need to turn things around.”

“This pastor will heal our divisions.”

“This person will bring new energy to everything.”

These statements create an impossible ministry before the pastor arrives.

Instead say what the committee actually discerned.

For example:

“We repeatedly saw a capacity for collaborative leadership and community engagement that connects with the ministry our congregation has said it wants to deepen.”

Ground hope in observed gifts.

7. Prepare the Congregation for Partnership

The new pastor will not arrive to perform ministry for the congregation.

Say this before the call is extended.

Our congregation will need to bring:

The candidate brings:

Ministry together will require:

A useful sentence might be:

“We are not recommending someone to carry the future of this congregation for us. We are recommending someone with whom we believe we can faithfully share that future.”

8. Name the Congregation's Responsibility

Ask members to think beyond:

Do I like the candidate?

Invite them instead to consider:

Can I welcome this person as pastor?

Can I listen to them?

Can I allow them to learn us before expecting them to lead major change?

Can I participate in ministry rather than waiting for them to do it?

What do we want the congregation to understand about its responsibility?

9. Prepare the Congregation for a Person, Not an Ideal

The congregation may have imagined the next pastor for months.

Different members may be expecting:

a strong preacher

a pastoral caregiver

a charismatic leader

an administrator

a young pastor

an experienced pastor

someone exactly like the previous pastor

someone completely different from the previous pastor

No candidate can fulfill all of those expectations.

Unrealistic expectations we should gently address:

What would be healthier to say?

10. Prepare the Congregation to Meet the Candidate Freshly

Avoid:

“You'll love them.”

“Wait until you hear the sermon.”

“This candidate is amazing.”

Those comments tell members what they are supposed to experience.

Invite curiosity instead.

Perhaps:

“We hope you will come ready to listen, ask thoughtful questions, and experience the candidate for yourself.”

Language we want to use:

11. Explain What One Weekend Can and Cannot Reveal

The Search Committee has known the candidate across months.

The congregation may have:

one sermon

one reception

one question-and-answer session

one weekend

That is not the same amount of information.

Say so.

What congregation can reasonably experience:

What it cannot know in one weekend:

Why the Search Committee's longer discernment matters:

This prevents a single sermon or awkward conversation from carrying unreasonable weight.

12. Prepare the Congregation for the Sermon

If the candidate will preach:

Remind members:

One sermon is one sermon.

The committee's recommendation is not based on a single preaching performance.

Invite members to listen for:

engagement with Scripture

theological imagination

communication

pastoral voice

connection with congregational life

Do not turn worship into an audition.

What should the congregation understand before worship?

13. Worship Is Still Worship

If the candidate preaches during a candidating weekend, resist turning the sanctuary into an evaluation room.

Avoid:

whispered ratings

immediate polls

comparing notes during worship

analyzing delivery while leaving the sanctuary

asking members for scores

Worship remains an act of worship.

Evaluation can wait.

14. Prepare Members for Question-and-Answer Time

If the congregation will meet the candidate in a public conversation, provide guidance.

Encourage questions about:

ministry

theology

leadership

mission

community

worship

congregational life

hopes for shared ministry

Avoid questions about:

private family matters

health

age

protected personal information

other candidates

confidential search conversations

compensation unless formally appropriate

why the candidate is leaving their current congregation in ways that invite confidential disclosure

We will communicate these boundaries:

15. Prepare Better Congregational Questions

Instead of:

“What will you do to grow our church?”

consider:

“How have you helped congregations become more deeply engaged with their communities?”

Instead of:

“What changes would you make?”

consider:

“What would you want to understand about us before imagining change?”

Instead of:

“Will you visit people?”

consider:

“How do you understand pastoral care as a shared ministry of pastor and congregation?”

Instead of:

“How will you bring young people back?”

consider:

“What have you learned about building meaningful relationships across generations?”

Questions we want to encourage:

16. Consider Moderating Questions

An open microphone can create unnecessary risk.

Consider:

written questions

moderated questions

questions submitted in advance

clear time limits

facilitator empowered to redirect inappropriate questions

Format:

Moderator:

How questions will be collected:

How inappropriate questions will be handled:

Good facilitation protects both candidate and congregation.

17. Prepare the Moderator

The moderator should be ready to say:

“That question touches on a private matter, so let's move to another question.”

or:

“That is a question the Search Committee addressed confidentially and is not something we can discuss publicly.”

or:

“Let's reframe that question around ministry rather than personal information.”

Moderator:

Backup:

Do not leave the candidate responsible for policing the congregation's boundaries.

18. Prepare the Congregation for Difference

The candidate may not:

preach like the previous pastor

dress like the previous pastor

have the same personality

lead worship the same way

have the same family structure

use familiar theological language

approach leadership in the expected way

Ask:

Can we meet this candidate as themselves rather than measuring them against someone else?

Comparison we should help the congregation release:

19. Prepare the Congregation Not to Interview the Family

If spouse, partner, or children attend:

Say clearly:

“Please welcome the candidate's family as guests. They are not part of the candidacy and are not being evaluated.”

Members should not ask:

“Are you excited about moving here?”

“What ministry will you do?”

“Will you join the choir?”

“Do the children like the church?”

How will we communicate this?

Use **FM 8.6 — Welcoming Spouses and Families**.

20. Prepare Staff

Staff members may feel particularly vulnerable.

Before the public weekend:

Staff know the schedule

Staff know what may be shared

Staff understand their role

Staff know whether feedback is being requested

Staff know what remains confidential

Staff have a contact for questions

Candidate understands staff relationships

Who communicates with staff?

What will staff be told?

21. Prepare Session or Governing Leaders

Leaders should understand:

the Search Committee's recommendation

the next required process

the Terms of Call

the candidate's role during the weekend

their own role

confidentiality requirements

how congregational questions will be handled

Leadership briefing date:

Person responsible:

Questions to address:

22. Prepare Greeters and Hospitality Teams

People serving in hospitality should know:

candidate's name

spouse/partner/family names as appropriate

pronunciation

schedule

confidentiality status

where to direct questions

how not to overwhelm the candidate

Hospitality coordinator:

Instructions:

Warmth is helpful.

A receiving line lasting forty-five minutes may not be.

23. Prepare the Congregation for Informal Conversation

Members do not need perfect questions.

They can simply say:

“Welcome. We're glad you're here.”

or:

“What have you enjoyed seeing in our community?”

or:

“What has surprised you about us?”

Allow the candidate to experience ordinary human conversation.

Suggestions we may share:

24. Discourage Lobbying Before the Vote

Avoid congregational campaigns:

“We have to get everyone to vote yes.”

or:

“We need to stop this candidate.”

If formal congregational action is required, prepare members for discernment rather than campaigning.

How will we describe the congregation's role?

25. Explain the Vote Honestly

If a congregational vote is required, members should know:

What they are voting on:

Whether Terms of Call are included:

What threshold is required:

What happens after the vote:

What presbytery/judicatory steps remain:

Do not assume everyone understands the polity.

26. Do Not Imply the Vote Is Merely Ceremonial

If the congregation genuinely has a decision to make, say so.

But also explain the Search Committee's role.

The committee is not saying:

“Here is someone we thought you might consider.”

It is saying:

“After completing the work you entrusted to us, we recommend this candidate.”

Both realities can coexist.

27. Prepare the Congregation for the Search Committee's Confidence

Committee members should be able to say:

“We recommend this candidate.”

Not:

“Well, nobody is perfect.”

Not:

“We hope it works out.”

Not:

“This is the best we could find.”

The committee has done the work.

Speak with appropriate confidence.

28. Prepare the Congregation for the Search Committee's Humility

Confidence should not become certainty.

Avoid:

“God told us this is the person.”

“We know this is God's choice.”

“There is no question this is the right pastor.”

Prefer:

“Through prayerful and careful discernment, we have come to believe this is the candidate we should recommend.”

Faithfulness and humility belong together.

29. Be Honest About What the Committee Knows

The committee knows:

what it has observed

what the candidate has shared

what references have helped clarify

what patterns have emerged

what concerns were explored

what hopes have developed

The committee does not know:

exactly what the pastorate will become

whether every member will be satisfied

how every future conflict will unfold

how long the pastor will stay

whether membership will grow

What we can say:

What we cannot promise:

30. Prepare the Congregation for Beginning, Not Completion

The arrival of a pastor does not mean transition is over.

The next stage includes:

learning one another

establishing trust

discovering working rhythms

clarifying expectations

integrating family into community without imposing roles

learning the congregation's stories

learning the community

moving from honeymoon toward partnership

What should the congregation understand about this?

This is a crucial transition in expectations.

31. Prepare Members to Give the New Pastor Time

Encourage the congregation not to expect immediate:

major changes

new programs

strategic plans

staff restructuring

membership growth
solutions to old problems
Instead invite:
listening
relationship
storytelling
community learning
worship
shared discernment
What do we want members to give the new pastor in the first months?

32. Prepare Members to Let Go of the Search

Once a pastor is called, the congregation must eventually stop interviewing them.
This means members should not continue asking:
“What would you do about…?”
“What is your position on…?”
“What are you going to change?”
The search ends.
Relationship begins.
How can we communicate this transition?

33. Prepare the Search Committee to Release Its Role

Search Committee members can easily become:
interpreters of the new pastor
defenders of the new pastor
informal gatekeepers
special insiders
intermediaries between pastor and congregation
That is not their continuing role.

Ask:

After the call, our committee will need to release:

We should not become:

We can help transition by:

The pastor needs a congregation, not a permanent Search Committee around them.

34. Decide How Much Search Detail to Share

The congregation may be curious:

“How many candidates did you interview?”

“Was this the first candidate?”

“Were there other finalists?”

“Did everyone agree?”

Decide beforehand what your process allows and what serves the congregation.

We will share:

We will not share:

Confidentiality does not end because the search has succeeded.

35. Prepare a Congregational Announcement

The announcement should include:

candidate's name

position

brief biographical information

a concise statement of why the committee recommends them

candidating weekend or meeting schedule
congregational action required
appropriate links or information
invitation to participate

Person drafting:

Candidate reviewing:

Approval required:

Distribution date:

Keep it concise and grounded.

36. Communication Channels

Use the channels appropriate to your congregation.

Email
Letter
Church website
Newsletter
Worship announcement
Social media
Printed bulletin insert
Congregational meeting notice
Other: _____

First communication:

Follow-up communication:

Public social media begins:

Coordinate timing carefully.

37. Social Media

Once public communication is authorized:

Candidate has approved photograph

Candidate has approved biography

Current congregation considerations have been addressed

Announcement timing is coordinated

Family information is shared only with permission

Comments will be monitored if necessary

No information about other candidates is shared

Person responsible:

38. Prepare for Congregational Anxiety

Predict some of the questions likely to arise.

We expect anxiety around:

The question people may ask:

The deeper concern may be:

How we can respond:

Do not dismiss anxiety.

Interpret it.

39. Prepare for Congregational Excitement

Excitement can also distort expectations.

Members may say:

“Everything is going to change now.”

“We're going to grow again.”

“The hard part is over.”

Respond with hope and realism.

What do we want to affirm?

What expectation should we gently correct?

40. Prepare the Congregation to Bless the Transition

The candidating process should not be only procedural.

Consider how worship can hold:

gratitude for the Search Committee

gratitude for the candidate

recognition of the transition

prayer for current congregation the candidate may be leaving

prayer for the ministry ahead

humility about what remains unknown

Worship element:

Person responsible:

41. Suggested Congregational Framing

A useful way to speak about the weekend is:

“Your Search Committee has spent months getting to know this candidate through conversation, prayer, interviews, reflection, and reference conversations. We are recommending this person because we have come to believe that their gifts and our congregation's vocation may belong together. This weekend is your opportunity to begin encountering the person we have come to know.”

Then:

“Come with curiosity rather than a checklist.”

42. Congregational Preparation Checklist

Before Announcement

Candidate ready

Terms sufficiently clear

Denominational procedures confirmed

Other candidates appropriately notified

Candidate biography approved

Candidate photograph approved

Communication sequence established

Congregational Communication

Search process briefly explained

Recommendation clearly stated

Candidate gifts described

Congregational vocation connected

Weekend schedule communicated

Congregational action explained

Appropriate questions encouraged

Confidentiality boundaries maintained

Weekend Preparation

Worship organized

Q&A facilitated

Moderator prepared

Staff prepared

Session/governing leaders prepared

Hospitality team prepared

Family treated as guests

Candidate protected from over-scheduling

Congregational Expectations

No promises of growth

No promises of immediate change

Partnership emphasized

Congregational responsibility named

First months framed as relationship-building

Search Committee prepared to release its role

43. The Question Before the Congregation

The Search Committee has been asking for months:

Could we imagine ministry together?

Now the congregation begins asking the same question.

But help members understand what they are not being asked:

Is this person perfect?

Do they match every preference I have?

Did I like every sentence in the sermon?

Would I have chosen exactly this person?

The larger question is:

Can we receive this person as pastor and enter the work of becoming partners in ministry together?

44. A Prayer for the Congregation Before Candidating Weekend

God of every calling,

You have been with this congregation throughout this season of transition.

You have accompanied those who remembered,
those who grieved,
those who listened,
those who searched,
and those who waited.

Now we prepare to meet someone whose journey may become joined with ours.

Give us curiosity rather than judgment.

Give us hospitality rather than performance.

Give us freedom from the need to compare this candidate with pastors we have known before.

Help us listen for the gifts this person brings
and for the responsibilities we will carry together.

Protect us from imagining that a new pastor will solve what belongs to all of us.

Help us instead imagine the ministry that may become possible when pastor and congregation learn to follow Christ together in this place.

Give the candidate the same freedom we ask for ourselves:

freedom to listen,
freedom to question,
freedom to discern,
and freedom to respond faithfully.

And in all that lies ahead,
keep us attentive to the work Christ is already doing among us.

Amen.

Leader's Note

The congregation has been waiting for this moment.

For months, members have probably asked:

“How is the search going?”

“Have you found anyone?”

“When are we going to meet the candidate?”

Now the Search Committee finally has something to tell them.

That excitement is understandable.

The committee's language now can shape the beginning of the next pastorate.

If you say:

“We found the person who is going to turn this church around,”

the pastor begins under a burden no one can carry.

If you say:

“This candidate has everything we were looking for,”

ordinary human limitations will eventually feel like disappointments.

If you say:

“We know this is God's choice,”

you leave little room for the congregation's own discernment—or for the humility every pastoral relationship requires.

Tell a more truthful story.

Tell the congregation what you actually saw.

Tell them what patterns emerged.

Tell them why those gifts matter for the ministry before you.

Tell them where you became hopeful.

Then invite the congregation to meet the candidate with curiosity.

Prepare them for the most important transition of all.

The congregation is not simply choosing a pastor.

It is choosing to become a congregation with this pastor.

That means the question before them is not merely:

“Do we want this person?”

It is also:

“Are we ready to become partners in the ministry we are asking this person to share with us?”

That is the beginning you are preparing for.

FM 10.7

Search Committee Transition Checklist

Purpose

The Search Committee has completed one of the most demanding responsibilities a congregation can entrust to its members.

It has listened, prayed, read, interviewed, questioned, reflected, protected confidentiality, worked through differences, checked references, welcomed candidates, and finally recommended a pastor.

Now the committee itself must transition.

Search Committees can easily remain informal power centers after the call. Members may become interpreters of the new pastor, defenders of decisions, keepers of privileged information, or unofficial intermediaries between pastor and congregation.

That is not healthy for the new pastoral relationship.

The Search Committee's final task is to release the role it has carried and help the congregation move from **searching for a pastor** to **becoming a congregation with its new pastor**.

The guiding principle is:

Finish the search well enough that the new relationship can begin without the Search Committee standing in the middle of it.

1. Clarify When the Committee's Work Ends

Identify the formal ending point.

Our Search Committee's work officially concludes when:

☐ Candidate accepts
☐ Congregation votes
☐ Presbytery/judicatory approves the call
☐ Pastor begins ministry
☐ Final transition responsibilities are completed
☐ Other: _____

Official date:

Do not allow the committee to drift indefinitely because members remain interested in what happens next.

2. Distinguish Search From Transition

Some tasks may remain after the candidate is called.

These are transition tasks, not additional candidate evaluation.

Possible tasks include:

☐ Supporting candidating weekend
☐ Coordinating communication
☐ Assisting with moving logistics
☐ Helping prepare welcome events
☐ Sharing search insights appropriately with transition leaders
☐ Other: _____

Tasks the Search Committee will complete:

Tasks that belong to someone else:

Transfer them deliberately.

3. Identify Who Owns the Next Stage

Beginning ministry may involve:

☐ Session/governing body
☐ Personnel committee
☐ Transition team
☐ Welcome team
☐ Staff
☐ Presbytery/judicatory
☐ Deacons
☐ Congregational leaders
☐ Other: _____

Primary responsibility now belongs to:

Contact person:

Date responsibility transfers:

A clear handoff prevents the Search Committee from becoming the default answer to every transition question.

4. Decide Whether a Transition Team Is Needed

A transition team can help the congregation and pastor navigate the first months.

If one is used:

Transition team will:

☐ Welcome pastor and family
☐ Coordinate practical arrival needs
☐ Help pastor learn the congregation
☐ Help pastor learn the community
☐ Facilitate early expectation conversations
☐ Support staff relationships
☐ Encourage congregational hospitality
☐ Coordinate initial listening opportunities
☐ Other: _____

Search Committee members serving on transition team:

Be cautious.

Some continuity can help.

Too much continuity can prevent the Search Committee from releasing its role.

5. Do Not Automatically Turn the Search Committee Into the Transition Team

Ask:

Does this group have the right gifts for the next work?

Search and transition require different capacities.

Search required:

confidentiality

interviewing

evaluation

candidate comparison

reference work

discernment

Transition requires:

hospitality

relationship building

communication

integration

expectation management

listening

helping congregation and pastor learn one another

Should this committee continue intact?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Why?

Continuity should serve the transition, not merely preserve familiarity.

6. Name What Must Be Handed Off

List practical responsibilities.

Responsibility:

Goes to:

Date:

Responsibility:

Goes to:

Date:

Responsibility:

Goes to:

Date:

Possible items:

moving coordination

office preparation

housing

technology

staff orientation

community introductions

worship planning

communications

congregational welcome

benefits enrollment

presbytery paperwork

7. Transfer Important Information Carefully

The new pastor and appropriate leaders may need some information from the search.

But not everything.

Ask:

What information serves the beginning of ministry?

and:

What information belongs permanently inside the confidential search process?

Appropriate to transfer:

Remains confidential:

Do not hand the new pastor a file containing committee members' private observations about them.

8. What the New Pastor Should Know

Appropriate transition information may include:

☐ Major congregational hopes
☐ Expectations that surfaced during the search
☐ Significant areas of ministry interest

☐ Congregational questions likely to emerge
☐ Practical commitments made during the search
☐ Important community relationships
☐ Agreements about staff or schedule
☐ Items identified for early follow-up
☐ Other: _____

Information to share:

Who will share it?

When?

9. What the New Pastor Should Not Receive

Do not share:

☐ Individual committee members' candidate ratings
☐ Confidential reference comments
☐ Names of other candidates
☐ Comparisons with other candidates
☐ Private committee disagreement
☐ Unnecessary personal information
☐ Unresolved gossip
☐ Statements such as “Three of us were never sure about you”
☐ Other confidential material

The pastor needs a beginning, not access to the jury room.

10. Preserve Commitments Made During the Search

Review the search for promises made to the candidate.

We promised:

We agreed:

We said we would revisit:

We recognized ministry together would require:

Person responsible for carrying this forward:

Do not allow promises to disappear when the committee dissolves.

11. Transfer the Terms of Call

Confirm that the appropriate body has complete and accurate records.

☐ Final Terms of Call transferred
☐ Compensation details transferred
☐ Benefit enrollment initiated
☐ Housing/manse arrangements transferred
☐ Vacation/study leave clarified
☐ Moving expenses transferred
☐ Professional expenses transferred
☐ Start date confirmed
☐ Other agreements documented

Responsible person/body:

Completion date:

12. Transfer Practical Candidate Requests

During discernment, the candidate may have raised practical needs.

Request:

Responsible body:

Status:

Request:

Responsible body:

Status:

Do not make the new pastor repeat conversations already held with the committee.

13. Close the Other Candidate Files

Confirm:

☐ All other candidates have received communication
☐ Outstanding reimbursements completed
☐ Candidate files handled according to policy
☐ Reference notes secured/disposed of appropriately
☐ Shared digital folders closed
☐ Personal copies deleted if required
☐ Confidentiality continues

Person responsible:

Completion date:

Use **FM 10.5 — Communicating with Other Candidates**.

14. Decide What Search Records Must Be Retained

Follow congregational, presbytery, legal, and denominational requirements.

Records to retain:

Storage location:

Access limited to:

Retention period:

Records to destroy:

Person responsible:

Do not retain sensitive candidate information simply because no one knows what else to do with it.

15. Close Digital Access

Search Committees often use:

shared drives

cloud folders

group email

messaging threads

spreadsheets

shared interview notes

Confirm:

☐ Shared folder archived or closed
☐ Access permissions removed
☐ Candidate documents deleted where required
☐ Personal devices cleared according to policy
☐ Group email handled appropriately
☐ Messaging threads handled appropriately
☐ Passwords changed if necessary

Person responsible:

16. Return Physical Materials

Check for:

☐ Printed résumés
☐ Candidate profiles
☐ Reference notes
☐ Interview notebooks

☐ Confidential correspondence
☐ Background-check materials
☐ Committee binders
☐ Other: _____

Disposition:

Do not leave candidate material in cars, homes, desks, or church closets.

17. Confidentiality Does Not End

The search may be complete.

Confidentiality remains.

Search Committee members should not later say:

“You should have heard what the references said.”

“We almost called someone else.”

“Half the committee wasn't sure.”

“You were actually our second choice.”

“There was another candidate who preached better.”

Those conversations violate trust and poison relationships.

We agree that confidential search information remains confidential:
☐ Yes

18. Clarify What Can Now Be Shared

Members may appropriately share:

the broad process

gratitude for the work

reasons for the committee's recommendation already communicated publicly

excitement about beginning ministry

They should not share:

confidential candidate information

other candidates' identities

reference information

individual committee votes

private committee conflict

Appropriate public story:

Matters that remain private:

19. Stop Interpreting the New Pastor

Search Committee members know more about the candidate than most congregational members.

That can create an unhealthy role.

Avoid:

“What she really means is…”

“When we interviewed him, he told us…”

“I know why she does that.”

“Let me explain him to you.”

The pastor must develop direct relationships with the congregation.

Search Committee members should not become translators.

20. Stop Interpreting the Congregation to the Pastor

Likewise avoid:

“Don't worry about George; nobody listens to him.”

“The session always does this.”

“You need to keep Mary happy.”

“Here's who really has power.”

Some orientation is helpful.

Recruiting the pastor into old alliances is not.

Information that helps orientation:

Information that would recruit the pastor into factions:

Learn the difference.

21. Do Not Become the Pastor's Protective Circle

Search Committee members often feel personally invested in the pastor's success.

That is natural.

But avoid becoming:

defenders

bodyguards

political allies

explanation teams

unofficial advisers on every congregational issue

If someone criticizes the pastor, resist:

“You don't understand. We chose them because…”

Instead encourage direct relationship where appropriate.

The pastor must become pastor to the whole congregation, not pastor to the Search Committee's constituency.

22. Do Not Become the Congregation's Complaint Desk

Members may approach Search Committee members:

“You chose him. Why is he doing this?”

“This isn't what you told us.”

“You need to talk to her.”

Prepare a response.

For example:

“The Search Committee's work has ended. If you have a concern about the pastor's ministry, please speak directly with the pastor or use the congregation's appropriate leadership process.”

Our response:

Do not become permanent intermediaries.

23. Do Not Keep Interviewing the Pastor

Once the pastor arrives, stop asking:

“So what are you going to do about…?”

“Have you figured out your vision yet?”

“When are you going to change…?”

The search is over.

The pastor now needs to:

listen

learn

build relationships

understand the community

establish trust

enter the congregation's rhythms

Give them room.

24. Release the Candidate Version of the Person

Throughout the search, the committee experienced someone presenting their ministry carefully and intentionally.

Now that person becomes pastor.

The relationship changes.

The pastor will:

make mistakes

have tired days

preach ordinary sermons

disagree with people

need boundaries

learn slowly

surprise the committee

change

Do not compare the pastor with the candidate you interviewed.

Allow a real relationship to emerge.

25. Release Your Insider Status

Search Committee members may enjoy being:

“The people who really know the pastor.”

Release that identity.

Ask:

What would it mean for us to stop being insiders?

What relationships should the pastor now develop independently?

Where do we need to move out of the way?

This is a gift to the new pastor.

26. Celebrate the Committee's Work

Do not simply dissolve after the vote.

Mark what the committee has accomplished.

Consider:

☐ Prayer of thanksgiving
☐ Recognition in worship
☐ Meal together
☐ Note of gratitude from session
☐ Congregational acknowledgment
☐ Private celebration
☐ Other: _____

Celebration:

Date:

People have given significant time and emotional energy.

Say thank you.

27. Thank the People Who Supported the Search

Consider:

☐ Search Committee members
☐ Presbytery liaison

☐ Interim/transitional pastor
☐ Staff
☐ Session
☐ Hospitality volunteers
☐ Community partners
☐ Technology support
☐ Congregational members who participated
☐ Other: _____

People/groups to thank:

Gratitude closes work well.

28. Conduct a Final Committee Debrief

Before dissolving, meet once more without a candidate decision to make.

Ask:

What did we do well?

What was difficult?

What did we learn about discernment?

What did we learn about our congregation?

What did we learn about ourselves?

What would we recommend to a future Search Committee?

29. Record Lessons for the Future

Create a short process note.

Do not include confidential candidate information.

What served us well:

What we would change:

Resources that were especially useful:

Process problems:

Advice for a future Search Committee:

Store this with appropriate congregational records.

Institutional memory can keep future committees from reinventing everything.

30. Identify Unfinished Congregational Work

The search may have revealed issues no pastor can solve alone.

Perhaps:

☐ Unclear mission
☐ Unrealistic pastoral expectations
☐ Staff structure concerns
☐ Financial pressures
☐ Building issues
☐ Leadership fatigue
☐ Congregational divisions
☐ Community disconnection
☐ Weak communication

☐ Other: _____

Unfinished work:

Who owns it now?

When will it be addressed?

Do not quietly transfer every unresolved issue to the new pastor.

31. Identify What Belongs in Beginning Ministry Together

During the search, the committee may have identified matters to revisit later.

Candidate wanted to revisit:

Committee recognized:

Expectations requiring early conversation:

Community relationships worth continuing:

Staff matters requiring attention:

Who receives this information?

32. Prepare a Handoff Summary

Create a brief transition summary containing only appropriate information.

Candidate/pastor commitments:

Congregational commitments:

Practical items pending:

Early conversations recommended:

Community introductions requested:

Other:

Keep it concise.

This is not a dossier.

33. Consider a Thirty-Day Follow-Up

If appropriate, a designated transition leader—not necessarily the Search Committee—might check:

Has the pastor received:

☐ Office access
☐ Technology
☐ Benefits
☐ Moving reimbursement
☐ Housing support
☐ Staff orientation
☐ Community introductions
☐ Calendar information
☐ Presbytery support
☐ Other: _____

This is practical transition care, not continuing evaluation.

34. Consider a Ninety-Day Conversation

A healthy beginning may include an early conversation among pastor and appropriate leaders around:

expectations

communication

schedule

staff relationships

session relationship

pastoral care

community engagement

surprises

adjustments

Who should convene it?

Approximate date:

This belongs to the new pastoral relationship, not to the Search Committee's continuing authority.

35. Do Not Conduct a Ninety-Day Performance Review

The first months are for assimilation and learning.

Avoid:

“Are they doing what they promised?”

Instead ask:

What are we learning about one another?

What expectations need clarification?

What is working naturally?

Where do we need adjustment?

This is the movement from honeymoon toward partnership.

36. Prepare for Search Committee Grief

Search Committee members may feel unexpectedly flat after the search ends.

For months, the committee had:

purpose

confidentiality

intense conversations

shared responsibility

a common goal

close relationships

Then it stops.

I may miss:

Something this committee has meant to me:

A relationship I hope continues:

The end of the committee is also an ending.

Acknowledge it.

37. Prepare for Search Committee Relief

Some members may simply feel:

Thank God we're done.

That is allowed too.

Something I am glad to release:

Something I do not want to carry forward:

Relief can be part of a healthy ending.

38. Bless the New Pastor Without Possessing Them

Search Committee members may feel:

This is our pastor because we found them.

No.

The pastor now belongs in relationship with the whole congregation.

A useful shift is:

We helped introduce pastor and congregation. Now the relationship belongs to them.

What do we need to release so that can happen?

39. Bless the Congregation Without Managing It

The committee also needs to trust the congregation.

Members may respond differently to the new pastor.

Some will connect immediately.

Some slowly.

Some may struggle.

The Search Committee cannot manage those responses.

We need to trust the congregation to:

We need to resist:

The relationship must develop beyond the committee's control.

40. Search Committee Transition Checklist

Administrative

Committee ending date established

Responsibilities transferred

Terms of Call records transferred

Practical commitments handed off

Candidate records handled appropriately

Digital access closed

Physical records handled securely

Outstanding reimbursements completed

Required reports submitted

Confidentiality

Confidentiality expectations reviewed

Other candidate identities protected

Reference information protected

Committee deliberations remain confidential

Search files secured/disposed of appropriately

Transition

Beginning-ministry issues identified

Transition leadership identified

Candidate/pastor requests handed off

Congregational commitments handed off

Staff transition needs communicated appropriately

Community introductions identified

Relationship

Committee will stop interviewing pastor

Committee will not become pastor's protective circle

Committee will not become complaint desk

Committee will not interpret pastor to congregation

Committee will not interpret congregation to pastor

Committee will release insider status

Closure

Final committee debrief held

Lessons documented without confidential information

Committee members thanked

Search supporters thanked

Congregational recognition considered

Closing prayer/blessing held

Committee formally released

41. A Final Committee Conversation

Go around the table.

Each member completes:

Something I am grateful for…

Something I learned…

Something I want this congregation to remember…

Something I want the new pastor to receive from us…

Something I am ready to release…

No discussion is necessary.

Listen.

42. A Prayer of Release for the Search Committee

Faithful God,

you called us into this work before we knew where it would lead.

You gave us stories to hear,
questions to ask,
differences to hold,
decisions to make,
and people to trust.

We give thanks for every candidate who shared part of the journey with us.

We give thanks for this congregation,
which entrusted us with its hopes and its future.

And we give thanks for the pastor whose journey is now becoming joined with ours.

Our work as a Search Committee is ending.

Help us release it well.

Release us from the need to explain the pastor to the congregation.

Release us from the need to defend our decision.

Release us from the privilege of being insiders.

Release us from confidential stories that are not ours to repeat.

Release us from the idea that because we helped begin this relationship, we own it.

Give this pastor freedom to become pastor to the whole congregation.

Give this congregation freedom to learn its pastor.

Give them patience with one another,
curiosity about one another,
courage to tell the truth,
and grace enough to grow through disappointment as well as joy.

Keep what we have learned.

Bless what has begun.

And return each of us now to the ordinary ministry of this congregation,
where together we continue joining the work Christ is already doing in this place.

Amen.

43. Formal Release

If appropriate, the session or governing body may formally acknowledge:

“With gratitude for the work entrusted to you and completed faithfully, the Search Committee is released from its responsibilities.”

Date:

Body taking action:

Recorded in minutes:
☐ Yes
☐ No
Formal beginnings deserve formal endings.

44. The Last Question

Before the committee adjourns for the final time, ask:

Can we now trust pastor and congregation to begin becoming partners without us managing the relationship?

If the answer is yes, the committee has finished well.

Leader's Note

Search Committees often assume their work ends when the congregation votes.

Administratively, that may be almost true.

Relationally, one task remains.

Release.

For months, you have known things other people did not know.

You have talked with the candidate privately.

You have heard stories the congregation has never heard.

You know what questions were difficult.

You know what the references said.

You know which committee members were hesitant.

You know how close another candidate came.

That knowledge can make Search Committee members feel permanently connected to the pastor in a special way.

Resist it.

The congregation does not need a group of interpreters standing between itself and its new pastor.

The pastor does not need a group of protectors explaining the congregation.

Pastor and congregation now need to encounter one another directly.

They need to misunderstand one another occasionally.

They need to ask questions.

They need to disappoint one another.

They need to learn how to repair.

They need to discover how leadership, trust, mission, worship, care, and friendship will actually take shape between them.

That cannot happen fully while the Search Committee continues managing the relationship.

So finish the paperwork.

Protect the confidential material.

Transfer the commitments that matter.

Tell the next leaders what they genuinely need to know.

Celebrate what you have accomplished.

Then release your role.

You have not delivered a finished pastorate to the congregation.

You have helped two stories find one another.

Now the next story belongs to pastor and congregation together.

The Search Committee's final act of leadership is to step out of the center and make room for the relationship it helped begin.

FM 10.8

Handoff to Beginning Ministry Together

Purpose

The search is ending.

The pastoral relationship is beginning.

Those are not the same thing.

A successful search does not automatically create a successful beginning. The first months require different attention: learning one another, clarifying expectations, building trust, understanding congregational rhythms, entering the community, and allowing the new pastor to become pastor to the whole congregation.

The Search Committee has accumulated valuable knowledge.

Some should help the beginning.

Some should remain confidential.

This handoff transfers what will serve the new ministry without carrying the search process into the new relationship.

Carry forward the commitments. Release the evaluations.

Use this resource with **FM 10.7 — Search Committee Transition Checklist** and the appropriate resources in **Beginning Ministry Together**.

1. Identify the Receiving Group

The handoff should go to the people who will actually support the beginning.

Receiving body or team:

Possible:

Session/governing body

Transition team

Personnel committee

Head of staff

Clerk

Presbytery/judicatory representative

Other: _____

Primary contact:

Date of handoff:

Do not distribute search material broadly.

Share only what the next stage requires.

2. Clarify the Purpose of the Handoff

The purpose is to help the new pastor and congregation begin well.

It is not to:

continue evaluating the pastor

explain every committee opinion

preserve search-committee influence

provide background gossip

reveal reference information

compare the new pastor with other candidates

Complete:

The purpose of this handoff is to help pastor and congregation begin well by carrying forward…

3. What We Learned About the Congregation

The search may have revealed important things about the congregation itself.

We discovered that the congregation deeply values:

We discovered that members hope for:

We discovered anxiety around:

We discovered differing expectations about:

We discovered unfinished work around:

We discovered strengths we should continue building upon:

These may be more useful to the beginning than anything the committee learned about the candidate.

4. What the Congregation Said It Wanted

Return to the Ministry Discernment Profile and search conversations.

The congregation named these priorities:

Now ask:

Which remain most important as ministry begins?

5. What Changed During the Search

A search can change the congregation's understanding of what it needs.

At the beginning, we thought:

During the search, we learned:

By the end, we understood:

This should shape beginning ministry by:

Do not hand the new pastor an outdated job description after the congregation's understanding has moved on.

6. Commitments Made to the Candidate

Record any commitments the committee made that should not disappear after the search.

Commitment:

Who now owns it?

When should it be addressed?

Commitment:

Who now owns it?

When should it be addressed?

Commitment:

Who now owns it?

When should it be addressed?

Promises survive committee dissolution.

7. Candidate Questions That Matter for the Beginning

The candidate may have asked questions that revealed important areas for early conversation.

Candidate repeatedly asked about:

Candidate expressed particular interest in:

Candidate expressed concern about:

Candidate asked to revisit:

These questions should become early conversations about:

Do not interpret the questions.

Carry them forward.

8. Areas of Mutual Energy

During the search, some areas may have generated noticeable energy for both candidate and committee.

We experienced shared energy around:

Another:

Another:

These may be worth exploring early because:

Do not turn them immediately into programs.
Let them become conversations.

9. Areas That Will Require Attention

Some aspects of the possible partnership may have been recognized as needing intentional care.
This is different from transferring confidential candidate concerns.
Appropriate examples might include:
different communication styles
differing expectations about pastoral care
need for clear staff relationships
congregational anxiety about change
need for stronger session partnership
unclear community priorities
Area requiring attention:

Why:

Appropriate early conversation:

The handoff should name relational work, not private evaluation.

10. Expectations About Pastoral Care

The search may have surfaced differing assumptions.

Congregation tends to expect:

Candidate described pastoral care as:

Potential tension:

Early conversation should address:

Surface this kind of expectation early rather than discovering it during a crisis.

11. Expectations About Leadership

Congregation tends to expect the pastor to:

Candidate tends to understand leadership as:

Session/governing body expects:

Possible mismatch:

Early conversation:

12. Expectations About Change

Congregation is ready for:

Congregation says it is ready for:

Areas where readiness may be less certain:

Candidate should be given time to understand:

Do not hand the new pastor a mandate for immediate change because change was discussed during the search.

13. Expectations About Mission

Congregation understands mission primarily as:

Candidate's questions and stories emphasized:

Areas of natural connection:

Areas worth exploring together:

Mission should become shared discernment rather than a program assignment.

14. Expectations About Staff Relationships

If applicable:

Candidate will supervise:

Current staff relationships are:

Important role clarity needed around:

Staff may need support around:

Early staff-pastor conversation should include:

Do not transfer private staff opinions about the candidate.
Transfer structural realities and agreed expectations.

15. Expectations About Session / Governing Body

Meeting rhythm:

Current leadership culture:

Decisions are usually made by:

Areas where pastor/session clarity is especially important:

Early covenant conversation should include:

Pastor and governing body need to establish their own working relationship.

16. Expectations About Time and Availability

Congregational assumptions that surfaced:

Terms of Call established:

Boundaries already discussed with candidate:

Matters needing early reinforcement:

Do not allow the congregation to renegotiate availability informally after the pastor arrives.

17. Community Relationships to Carry Forward

The candidate may have become interested in people or organizations during the interview weekend.

Community partner:

Candidate expressed interest because:

Appropriate introduction/follow-up:

Responsible person:

Community partner:

Follow-up:

Let those relationships continue naturally.

18. Congregational Relationships Worth Introducing

The Search Committee may know people who can help the pastor understand different aspects of the congregation.

Person:

What perspective they bring:

Why an introduction might help:

Person:

Perspective:

Do not designate these people as gatekeepers.

They are possible conversation partners.

19. Voices the Pastor Should Hear Early

Ask:

Whose perspective might the pastor not encounter naturally?

Perhaps:

newer members

younger adults

longtime members

staff

parents

mission partners

people who are less involved

members who live farther away

people connected with community ministries

Voice/perspective:

Why:

Best way to create an encounter:

20. Congregational Stories Worth Hearing

The new pastor needs stories more than summaries.

Story about the congregation's identity:

Story about a difficult season:

Story about resilience:

Story about mission:

Story about change:

Who can tell each story well?

Do not preload the pastor with a single interpretation of the congregation's history. Let several people tell the stories.

21. Community Stories Worth Hearing

Story about the community's history:

Story about current change:

Story about community strength:

Story about community pain:

Who should tell these stories?

The pastor should encounter the place, not simply receive a demographic report.

22. What Should Happen in the First Thirty Days?

Possible priorities:

meeting staff
meeting session
worship
listening
pastoral care
community orientation
establishing schedule
understanding communication systems
learning congregational history
meeting key community partners
beginning relationships

Our top priorities:

Keep the list short.
The first month is not the time to accomplish everything.

23. What Should Not Be Expected in the First Thirty Days?

The new pastor should not be expected immediately to:
produce a strategic plan
redesign worship
solve longstanding conflict
restructure staff
create new programs
increase attendance
change committees
establish a full vision
know everyone

Expectations we need to resist:

How will leadership communicate this?

24. First Ninety Days

By approximately ninety days, it may be appropriate to have experienced:

☐ Regular worship leadership
☐ Staff relationship development
☐ Session/governing-body working relationship
☐ Congregational listening
☐ Community exploration
☐ Pastoral care rhythms
☐ Initial expectation clarification
☐ Mission conversations
☐ Other: _____

What would a healthy first ninety days look like?

Avoid turning this into a performance plan.

The goal is assimilation and relationship.

25. The First Six Months

The transition is still underway.

By this point, pastor and congregation may begin moving from introduction toward partnership.

Questions worth asking:

What are we learning about one another?

What surprised us?

What assumptions have needed adjustment?

Where is trust growing?

Where do expectations remain unclear?

What are we beginning to imagine together?

Approximate date for this conversation:

Who should convene it?

26. Do Not Hand Off a Performance Scorecard

Avoid transferring statements such as:

“The committee thought preaching was the candidate's strongest area.”

“We were a little worried about administration.”

“References said conflict might be difficult.”

Those belong to search discernment.

Instead transfer:

“Clear staff-role expectations will be important early.”

or:

“Pastor and session should discuss how decisions are made.”

Move from evaluation to relationship.

27. Do Not Hand Off Other Candidates

The receiving team does not need to know:

who else was interviewed

who nearly became the candidate

how the final candidate ranked

why others were released

what another candidate offered

We affirm:

Other candidate identities remain confidential

No comparisons will be carried into beginning ministry

The new pastor will not be told where they ranked

The new pastor will not be compared with other finalists

The new ministry begins with this pastor.

28. Do Not Hand Off Reference Comments

Reference conversations remain confidential.

Do not say:

“Your reference warned us that you sometimes…”

unless a specific matter was appropriately raised with the candidate during the search and became an explicit shared agreement.

Reference notes remain:

☐ Confidential

Stored/disposed of according to policy:

☐ Yes

The beginning relationship should not be haunted by undisclosed third-party commentary.

29. Do Not Hand Off Search Committee Factions

Do not tell the pastor:

“These members were for you.”

“These members were uncertain.”

“This person had to be convinced.”

Likewise, do not tell receiving leaders.

Search Committee deliberations remain confidential:

☐ Yes

The pastor should meet people without inherited alliances.

30. What the Receiving Team Needs to Hear About Confidentiality

Tell them:

This handoff contains only information appropriate for beginning ministry. It is not permission to ask about confidential Search Committee deliberations.

People receiving handoff:

Confidentiality expectation communicated:

☐ Yes

31. Document Practical Agreements

Start date:

Office readiness:

Technology:

Benefits:

Moving expenses:

Housing/manse:

Professional expenses:

Vacation/study leave:

Already scheduled commitments:

Other:

These should not require the pastor to renegotiate arrangements after arrival.

32. Already Scheduled Pastor Commitments

The candidate may have disclosed:
previously scheduled vacation
continuing education
family obligations
denominational meetings
speaking engagements
other commitments
Commitment:

Date:

Congregation has agreed:
☐ Yes
Responsible leader knows:
☐ Yes
Protect agreements already made.

33. Important Congregational Dates

Provide a practical calendar.

Major worship dates:

Session meetings:

Staff meetings:

Congregational events:

Presbytery meetings:

Mission events:

Other important dates:

Do not expect the new pastor to reconstruct the calendar from announcements.

34. Communications Orientation

The pastor should understand:

Weekly communication:

Newsletter:

Website:

Social media:

Emergency communication:

Staff communication:

Session communication:

Person responsible for orientation:

35. Systems Orientation

Identify systems the pastor needs to learn.

☐ Membership database
☐ Financial system
☐ Calendar
☐ Building access
☐ Security
☐ Worship planning
☐ Livestream
☐ Pastoral-care records
☐ Personnel procedures
☐ Presbytery systems
☐ Other: _____

Orientation responsibility:

Do not hand the pastor keys and assume they will figure everything out.

36. Pastoral Care Handoff

If there are active pastoral situations the new pastor needs to know, handle them through appropriate pastoral leadership—not casually through the Search Committee.

Who prepares pastoral-care handoff?

Confidentiality standards followed:

☐ Yes

Active situations appropriately transferred:

☐ Yes

Search Committee members should not become sources of confidential pastoral-care information unless they hold another appropriate role.

37. Staff Handoff

Who introduces staff responsibilities?

Who clarifies reporting relationships?

When will individual staff conversations occur?

When will full staff conversation occur?

Personnel policies reviewed:

☐ Yes

Current evaluations or personnel concerns handled through appropriate channels:

☐ Yes

Do not use the Search Committee to transmit personnel gossip.

38. Session / Governing Body Handoff

Early conversation should include:

How we communicate:

How agendas are developed:

How decisions are made:

What pastor can expect from session:

What session expects from pastor:

How differences will be handled:

How urgent matters are addressed:

When this conversation will happen:

39. Community Handoff

The pastor should have opportunities to encounter:

☐ Neighborhood around church
☐ Community partners
☐ Schools
☐ Civic leaders
☐ Social-service organizations
☐ Other congregations
☐ Presbytery colleagues
☐ Important gathering places
☐ Other: _____

Who will make introductions?

Which should happen early?

Do not schedule them all in the first week.

40. A Listening Season

Consider naming the first months explicitly as a listening season.

The pastor is listening to:

congregation

staff

session

community

history
worship
mission
people who are often unheard
The congregation is listening to:
pastor's stories
theology
questions
leadership
hopes
emerging perspective
Our listening period might last:

What should happen during it?

What should not be rushed?

41. Questions for Early Pastor–Congregation Conversation

Possible questions include:
What do you love about this congregation?
What do you hope I will understand before I try to lead?
What has this congregation learned through transition?
What do you hope we might discover together?
Where do you see God already at work?
Additional questions:

Use conversation to replace assumptions.

42. Questions for Early Pastor–Session Conversation

What do you need from me as pastor?

What can I expect from you as session?

How will we communicate when something is difficult?

How will we know when an expectation has not been communicated clearly?

What decisions belong to whom?

How will we protect one another from unnecessary surprises?

Additional:

43. Questions for Early Pastor–Staff Conversation

What helps you do your best work?

What do you need from a supervisor or colleague?

Where are roles unclear?

How do we want to communicate?

How will we handle disagreement?

What should I understand about the current ministry rhythm?

Additional:

44. Questions for the First Six-Month Review

Not a performance evaluation.

A relationship review.

Ask:

What has become easier?

What has been harder than expected?

What expectations have needed adjustment?

Where is trust growing?

Where do we need more clarity?

What are we beginning to imagine together?

Date:

Participants:

45. What Success Looks Like in the Beginning

Do not define success primarily as:

attendance growth

new programs

increased giving

immediate change

Early signs of a healthy beginning may include:

☐ Trust growing
☐ Direct communication
☐ Staff relationships forming
☐ Session partnership developing
☐ Congregational stories being heard
☐ Community relationships beginning
☐ Expectations becoming clearer
☐ Pastor developing appropriate boundaries
☐ Members engaging pastor directly
☐ Curiosity replacing projection
☐ Other: _____

What we hope to see:

46. Risks to Watch

Common early risks include:

☐ Congregation expecting immediate answers
☐ Pastor moving too quickly
☐ Pastor moving too cautiously
☐ Staff anxiety
☐ Search Committee remaining too central
☐ Congregational comparison with previous pastor
☐ Candidate promises becoming rigid expectations
☐ Unspoken schedule expectations
☐ Conflict avoidance
☐ Honeymoon idealization
☐ Other: _____

Risk most relevant here:

How can leadership attend to it?

47. The Honeymoon Is Not the Goal

A good beginning often includes enthusiasm.

Enjoy it.

Do not confuse early enthusiasm with mature partnership.

Eventually:

pastor will disappoint congregation

congregation will disappoint pastor

differences will emerge

boundaries will become real

leadership decisions will have consequences

people will stop being on their best behavior

That is not necessarily the end of a good beginning.

It may be the beginning of a real relationship.

How can we prepare for that transition?

48. From Honeymoon to Partnership

Ask:

What practices will help us move from initial enthusiasm toward durable trust?

Possible:

☐ Regular pastor-session conversation
☐ Clear feedback practices
☐ Staff covenant
☐ Early expectation review
☐ Congregational listening
☐ Community engagement
☐ Prayer
☐ Shared leadership
☐ Honest conflict practices
☐ Other: _____

Practices we want to establish:

49. What the Search Committee Releases

Before the handoff is complete:

We release responsibility for:

We release our interpretations of:

We release our insider knowledge about:

We release our need to make the call succeed:

We entrust the relationship to:

50. What the Receiving Team Accepts

We accept responsibility for:

We will protect:

We will help clarify:

We will resist:

We will encourage:

The handoff is complete only when someone has actually received the work.

51. Handoff Summary

Pastor:

Start date:

Receiving team:

Key congregational priorities:

Commitments made during search:

Early conversations needed:

Practical matters still pending:

Community relationships to continue:

Expectations requiring attention:

First thirty-day priorities:

First six-month conversation date:

52. Handoff Checklist

Search Completion

- [ ] Candidate accepted appropriate next step/call
- [ ] Required congregational action complete or scheduled
- [ ] Presbytery/judicatory requirements clear
- [ ] Terms of Call finalized appropriately
- [ ] Other candidates released
- [ ] Search Committee transition completed

Information

- [ ] Congregational priorities transferred
- [ ] Candidate commitments transferred
- [ ] Congregational commitments transferred
- [ ] Candidate questions carried forward appropriately
- [ ] Practical agreements documented

Important dates transferred

Community introductions identified

Early expectation conversations identified

Confidentiality

Other candidates remain confidential

Reference comments remain confidential

Committee deliberations remain confidential

Candidate evaluation notes not transferred

Appropriate search records secured/disposed of

Beginning Ministry

Receiving team identified

First thirty-day priorities identified

Staff orientation planned

Session orientation planned

Community orientation planned

Listening season encouraged

Six-month relationship conversation anticipated

Search Committee prepared to release role

53. A Prayer at the Handoff

Faithful God,
you have carried this congregation through searching, waiting, questioning, and discerning.
You have brought a pastor and congregation to the threshold of a new relationship.
We give thanks for what has been learned.
Help us carry forward what will serve the ministry ahead.
Help us release what belongs to the search.
Protect the stories entrusted in confidence.
Keep us from carrying judgments into relationships that now need freedom to grow.
Give this pastor patience to learn the congregation.
Give this congregation patience to learn its pastor.
Give staff and leaders courage to speak clearly.
Give all of us humility when expectations prove incomplete.
Let curiosity remain longer than certainty.
Let trust grow through honest conversation.

And as the excitement of beginning becomes the ordinary work of ministry, help pastor and congregation become partners in the work Christ is already doing in this place.

Amen.

Leader's Note

A handoff can become a data dump.

The Search Committee gives the new pastor a binder, a calendar, a list of names, a collection of files, and a summary of everything anyone thinks might matter.

That is not the most important transfer.

The most important things carried forward are relational.

Promises made.

Expectations discovered.

Questions that still deserve conversation.

Places where pastor and congregation experienced shared energy.

Areas where both already know attention will be needed.

The Search Committee also has things it must not transfer.

Its evaluations.

Its internal disagreements.

Its rankings.

Its reference conversations.

Its interpretations of the candidate.

Its sense of ownership.

Those belonged to discernment.

They do not belong in the new relationship.

The search asked:

Should we enter ministry together?

Beginning ministry asks:

How will we learn to become partners now that we have said yes?

That transition is not automatic.

The pastor will need time to stop being a candidate.

The congregation will need time to stop interviewing.

Staff will need time to discover a new working relationship.

Session will need to learn how this pastor leads.

The pastor will need to discover how this congregation actually lives—not merely how it described itself during the search.

The honeymoon will eventually give way to ordinary ministry.

That is not failure.

That is where the real pastoral relationship begins.

Hand off what matters.

Protect what was confidential.

Make the commitments visible.

Create the early conversations.

Then step away.

The search brought pastor and congregation to the threshold. The next work is learning how to cross it together.